

The Moment of Freedom

by Jeffrey Brooks

Introduction
by Susan Downing

What makes a gifted teacher? Is it possessing deep and brilliant insight into what he's teaching, so that he can expertly guide you on your path? Knowing how to present teachings, so that they'll illuminate exactly what you're seeking to have explained at that moment? Leading a life so in concert with what he's teaching, that he serves as an inspiring role model for you at all times? Or working with you with unflagging patience and love? According to the Lam Rim, the Tibetan Buddhist teaching on how to make your way to Buddhahood, a teacher must possess all of these qualities if he is to lead you along the path of transforming your life and moving from suffering to true happiness.

You can search for entire lifetimes without finding such a person. If you do manage to encounter a brilliant and gifted guide, what does it feel like to be in his presence? You will be able to answer that question for yourself as you read through *The Moment of Freedom*, because Jeffrey Brooks is, simply put, such a teacher.

The essays in this collection are unlike any dharma talks you've ever read or heard. Rather than resembling quiet epistles from a serene, distant monastery, Jeff's pieces are like dazzling lightning bolts, infused with insights gained from a night on patrol, conversations with karate students, or reflection on days spent in the chaotic world that surrounds us. Jeff's vision is razor sharp and clear, and bright as a diamond, and steeped in compassion, and he addresses us with urgency, because he sees that we desperately need an alternative to the suffering served up by today's declining society:

When there is not enough money, when our status falls, when the orgiastic disregard for family looks vain instead of appealing, when intoxication through drugs and alcohol and the internet seems to be a dead end, then it is possible to discover what really matters, what will really nourish us and protect us. ("This Magic Moment")

And what really matters is living a purposeful life devoted to doing right and being of service to others; to gaining the strength and stability necessary to make our way along our chosen path, and the kindness to help others make their way, too. In these inspiring essays, Jeff shows us how understanding Buddhist principles and integrating them into our chosen practice can help us be strong, good, purposeful people in the midst of everything that threatens to throw us off balance as we make our way through our daily lives.

These are the most important skills we can learn as human beings, and yet, no one else is teaching them to us. And no one else is teaching Buddhism this way. That was obvious to me the very first time I visited Jeff's zendo for Monday night meditation and a dharma talk. A friend had invited me, and his description of Jeff piqued my interest: not only was he an amazing teacher of both Tibetan and Zen Buddhism, who had taken Bodhisattva vows and was ordained in Zen; he was also a life-long karate practitioner who

ran a dojo. I wasn't sure what to expect, but from the moment I walked into the dojo/zendo, I felt right at the home. Jeff welcomed me briefly — he'd just finished teaching a karate class and went to change out of his gi before sitting — and in his greeting, I felt strength and confidence and genuine warmth.

I don't recall what his topic was that first evening, but I recognized that in this teacher I had found a great treasure. Although at that point I grasped very little about Buddhism, I understood that Jeff possessed the insight, depth of knowledge, and compassion that the Lam Rim says a teacher must have, if he is to guide you along the path to liberation.

What drew me so immediately and powerfully to Jeff's teachings? At the beginning, it was that in each of his dharma talks, he somehow managed to speak to precisely what was on my mind, to present an explanation and application of some dharma point that was perfectly relevant to me right at that moment. Each time, I would leave inspired, and with a valuable new insight. In speaking with others in the group, I learned that they often felt this, too.

His knowledge and understanding of both classical Indian Buddhist scriptures and Zen teachings astounded me. He has an unparalleled ability to teach the dharma so that seemingly impenetrable points — ones you've read about, but couldn't begin to grasp — suddenly become crystal clear. He never oversimplifies the concepts. He just illuminates them so that they seem simple. And he brings the teachings to life. To *our* lives. Jeff's brilliance — because I see him as the most brilliant teacher of practical Buddhism today — lies in his gift for using his insight to reveal Buddhism's connection to the experiences of everyday life and to teach us how to *live* Buddhism.

The examples he uses when explaining karma or emptiness or the three poisons help us see these key points through our own world:

The Niagara River looks powerful as it flows slowly, mile after mile. In an instant, without any hint of what is coming, it reaches the falls and explodes into thundering torrents and sprays as it crashes into the rocks below. It roils and spins and settles down, forming a slow, deep river once again.

So what is the water really like? What is the true nature of the water? Deep and peaceful? Chaotic and violent? Misty? Powerful?

The quality of the water is subject to conditions. Under some conditions it is one way. When conditions change it is another way. It adapts to the conditions as they change.

What is our true nature? Turbulent? Peaceful? Wise? Impulsive?

We also adapt to the conditions in which we find ourselves. The difference between ourselves and water is that we can determine the conditions in which we live. ("The Nature of Water")

When we'd hear Jeff approach Buddhism this way during his weekly dharma talks, we not only understood the gist of the teachings, but couldn't help but see how they related to our own lives and experience. In this way, every dharma talk helped us understand that we could extend our Buddhist practice beyond something we did once a week on Monday

evenings at the zendo: we could bring Buddhist principles to bear in all of our activities. As Jeff constantly reminded us,

There is no moment which is not a practice moment. We are all practicing something all the time. We can choose. We can prepare. We can condition our body and hearts and minds to use our lives for training. We can live our lives in the company of the Buddhas and ancestors. (“Ceaseless Practice.”)

Buddhist scriptures tell us of Bodhisattvas, beings who altruistically devote their entire lives to helping others end their suffering. The ultimate way to bring the Buddhist teachings into one’s life is through acting as a Bodhisattva, and this is precisely what Jeff does: every moment of his life becomes a manifestation of his dedication to *living out* Buddhism, through Buddhist practice, martial arts, and work in law enforcement. But these are not *separate*, unrelated, parts of his life; they are all inextricably bound together in one all-encompassing life of practice, all a blossoming of his commitment to working for others’ benefit.

Although Jeff’s own Bodhisattva action includes both martial arts practice and protecting the innocent through law enforcement, he makes it clear that we can find our own purpose by transforming our life through devoting ourselves to a spiritual path, art, athletics, our professional life, or through selfless work in the healing arts or other areas of service. He’s not set on turning us all into martial artists or police officers. What he’s doing in these essays is helping us understand why adopting a life of practice infused with Buddhism is so necessary now, how we can do this, and how doing so can transform our lives. The motivation we bring to this task is key:

If you are practicing so that you can defend your precious life from harm: good. If you are motivated to make yourself strong and sharp so you can take care of the people who depend on you — family, friends, neighbors, innocent strangers everywhere — that motivation itself will be a great source of personal power and inspiration for your practice. (“The Duty of the Martial Artist”)

But we don’t need just good intentions. We need to actually *do* this practice we adopt, and Jeff helps us get started. Here’s how he talks about beginning a martial arts practice:

Start from where you are. Train. Teach. Learn. Work together with the people around you.

Sweep the floor. Pay the bills. Train consistently and sincerely. Fear nothing: not your opponent, not your limits, not old age, not death.

That is the beginning of your duty as an individual martial artist. That is the calling that, if you make it your own, will focus your practice and make it matter, for a lifetime and perhaps, beyond. (“The Duty of the Martial Artist”)

It is this approach to living that brings true and lasting happiness. This is the thread that runs through all of Jeff’s teaching, and through all of the pieces in this book: if we put our efforts into learning how to act so that we will create happiness rather than suffering (whether for ourselves or others,) and if we devote ourselves to a sincere, consistent

practice that will allow us to gradually change our focus in life, then we can transform both our lives and others'. We will be calm and strong in the midst of difficult circumstances. Jeff puts it this way:

If our mind is pulled by likes and dislikes, anger and desire, jealousy and fear, continually disturbed by the inputs that cascade into our senses from the modern world, then that is the mind we are cultivating. If we take an hour or two a day to train, calmly, powerfully and clearly, if we train our minds to think clearly the rest of the time and deliberately make effort to detect when it is turbulent and to return it to a condition of clarity – even in the midst of action — then that is the life we cultivate. (“The Kingdom Within You”)

Jeff’s inspiring words introduce us to the Buddhist principles we can use to guide our actions and change our lives for the better; motivate us to make this effort; and provide encouragement for times when the going gets tough:

The point is not that we can succeed in permanently eradicating evil or weakness or vanity. The point is that we give our best effort to restrain them and combat them throughout our lives. To the degree that our skill, effort, energy, lifetime, is devoted to this in practice, we live a noble human life. (“What We Value”)

Jeff stresses that no one expect us to pull this off all alone: we need to encourage each other in this monumental and important work. His articles give us that support and serve as a model for how we can, in turn, help those around us who are also moving along this path. And through the example of his own life of practice, he both shows us that it can be done.

This is one of the most powerful aspects of Jeff’s teaching: as his student, you never feel that he is preaching or issuing pronouncements from on high. You understand that he is telling it like it is because he himself has experienced all that you’re going through. A true Bodhisattva, he understands our suffering and feels it as his own, and his every moment is dedicated to helping us make our way out of it. And so, he is moving along the path with us, reminding us of the urgency of our task and encouraging us when we’re discouraged that although this is tough work, because it *isn’t* an easy job:

We are like paratroopers, dropped behind enemy lines, surrounded, with no option but to do our jobs as human beings, with complete commitment, and no thought other than rescuing all those who can be saved. (“Life Is a Journey! (Please remain in your seats and enjoy the movie.)”)

Indeed, when we “unite with others in common purpose,” not only is our common work easier, we all benefit, because “this is the source of true community and true happiness.” (“The Effects of Unison Movement.”)

Jeff’s teachings have inspired countless students — martial artists and Buddhist practitioners alike. And like others who have worked with him, I have long wanted to make his teachings available to a larger audience. After all, studying with Jeff has utterly transformed my life: his priceless teaching gave me insight into my world and helped me learn how to live, so that I could experience true happiness and bring it to others, too, by

devoting myself to a life of practice and service. I wanted to thank him for all the ways he has benefited all of us through his teachings and the example of his life. And so, I worked with him to put together this collection of essays that grew out of his dharma talks.

It is a great honor for me to present these articles to you. Read them, use them, pass them on to everyone around you, both literally and in the form of your own purposeful life's work. As Jeff has said to us many times, "Be Strong. Do Right. Take care of people."

The Moment of Freedom

This Magic Moment

As times turn bad, the need for practice becomes more obvious. This is the upside of current events.

When there is not enough money, when our status falls, when the orgiastic disregard for family looks vain instead of appealing, when intoxication through drugs and alcohol and the internet seems to be a dead end, then it is possible to discover what really matters, what will really nourish and protect us.

There is no doubt that in times of hardship, people succumb to despair, raiding, addiction and savagery. But people can also band together in a spirit of respect and shared values and recover their humanity through training.

It costs nothing. It delivers everything.

It's good to come together with like-minded people to practice. But you do not need a group to get started. It's good to find a room that is simple, comfortable and quiet. But you don't need to go to a Zen center or to a special meditation hall or to an officially designated place.

You can sit still and tall with crossed legs and eyes down. You can walk with calm dignity. You can conduct yourself with purpose and skill, energy and composure. You can study the sutras and learn the difference between truth and lies, between what helps and what hurts.

You can trade confusion for clarity. You can substitute the pursuit of objects of desire that vanish without a trace with the pursuit of the skill to help the people who need you. That way you can dwell in the midst of difficulty with equanimity. You can encounter unpleasantness with courage, secure in the knowledge that what you are doing is good and essential.

Arm yourself with a life committed to practice, and no bribe will tempt you. No seduction, no distraction, no impulse, no intimidation will mean enough to you to dissuade you from your purpose.

But how do you get that purpose? How do we not feel distraction, despair, revulsion, attraction, overwhelmed by the mass of misery, disturbance and detail that commandeer our lives?

Stop and listen. See the river of poison flowing around you. Stay out of it. See the tenderness in the hearts of the people who need you. Go to them. See the generations of

neglected, ignorant and abused people, filled with hatred, moved by the fever of destruction. Understand that they will suffer more than their victims will. Do all you can to save those who still can be saved.

Not sure how? Find your practice and do it. Sit still and walk and work and live it out. Learn the four noble truths: That everyone suffers. That there is a reason for it. That there is an end to it. That there is a way to put an end to that suffering forever. It has been figured out and taught, again and again.

And if it takes the blessing of difficulty and discomfort to set our feet on the path of practice, then let's take it as a blessing and get on with it. Our lives will end someday, that is sure. But if we waste this chance to turn our lives toward practice, there will be no end to the trouble.

Protecting The Dalai Lama

When he is here in the US, the Dalai Lama is treated as a visiting head of state, and as such, receives a high level of security. Federal, state and local agencies coordinate to provide personal protection, site protection, and route protection, as they would for any dignitary of his stature.

The Dalai Lama has a powerful influence upon the people who encounter him. Many people, not merely Buddhist adepts, or even religious-minded people, report feeling that when they hear him speak they feel as if he is speaking directly to them. Many feel this even when they are in an arena that holds 50,000 other beings.

People say that their fear and anger, feelings they may have been unaware of, or to which they had grown accustomed without realizing it, dissolve. In place of these negative feelings, they say, arises a feeling of calm and peace and love.

For his presence to produce a result like that, without any evident effort or conscious intention on his part, is surely a mark of an extraordinary being. Some say he is the most accomplished human being on the planet, someone able to demonstrate by the facts of his life and his actions, how humans can mature and realize their full potential.

Millions of people buy his books, others listen to his talks online, and tens of thousands attend his lectures and teachings worldwide. He won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989. He is among the most revered figures in the world.

In some quarters, he is also among the most reviled. Hard to believe perhaps, but there are some who regard him as an enemy. The Chinese government, for example. Some Tibetan sects regard him as their competitor for authority, and these internecine struggles have been remarkably bitter. Some fundamentalist Christian groups regard him as a threat, teaching heresy. And where Islamic cultures border Buddhist ones, as in central Asia, the conflicts have been violent. The Taliban's bombing of the 125' tall, 1500 year old statues of the Buddha in the mountains at Bamiyan, Afghanistan is symbolic, but it is not unique. And there are always the lone nuts with a fantasy life or an imaginary grudge.

When observing the Dalai Lama in action, you can see his great courage. His openness, certainty and vulnerability are as much an example of his physical courage as his famous journey into exile through the snows of Tibet through the Himalayas to India, under fire from Chinese guns.

His kindness is courageous. There is no fear in his body. No fear in his emotional suppleness. No embarrassment, no tough pose, no declaration of victimization, no threats or pleas or promises. He employs none of the gamut of usual techniques of those who claim the attention of the public for their cause.

His dignity is complete. His effort on behalf of others is ceaseless. His sense of duty and the

clarity of his mission govern his public actions, and from all evidence we may guess, his private life as well.

We can see no hesitation in his exchange with people who make demands on him, who wish to debate him, who wish to draw from him, whether teaching or praise, status or support or refuge from a world of suffering.

He seems to connect with everyone. Yet he does not take his safety for granted. He does not presume that because he is good that no harm will come to him.

He is continually protected. Among his attendants and translators, monks and managers is a contingent of professional warriors, all of whom are willing to put their lives on the line and defend his life, without hesitation.

In 1959, when the Mao's army invaded Tibet, burned monasteries and murdered monks, the Dalai Lama's escape was managed by the CIA. This is no secret.

Some would say that the success of that venture was the result of his formidable good karma created in the infinite past. Still, they would have to agree that the karmic results of those past actions manifested in the form of strong, skilled, courageous, armed warriors. They protected the Dalai Lama and saved his life. Those modern warriors helped make possible the worldwide dissemination of classical Buddhism and the regeneration of Tibetan culture in India and the West.

The Dalai Lama is an immensely precious thing in the world today. We need to take care of precious things. Not squander them, abuse them, take them for granted, falsely assuming that we can get another one.

Our lives are precious. Our families are precious. Our friends, communities, our country, the world... draw the boundary where you want to, but we need to take care of what is precious.

As martial artists, we need to be sure that we are protecting what we value. If we are simply training our body and mind to prepare for conflict, and if, as a result, we neglect our motives and mission, we will eventually degrade the quality of our lives.

For example, one young martial artist I knew tried always to remain ramrod straight and hyper-vigilant, even when going to a restaurant or attending a family barbecue. He was trying to fulfill his idea of being an excellent martial artist. Someone must have told him that a martial artist is "always ready," and he interpreted it in this way.

That kind of posturing is showy and exhausting; it is not strength. If there is no purpose for one's martial arts practice, if there is no goal to which that person can strive, which will serve as a kind of north star by means of which they can plot the path of their practice, if nothing beyond increased personal power occupies them, then their training will construct

walls between themselves and others. Instead of making life better, it can make life worse – more rigid, alienated and pretentious, always in need of affirmation.

People have asked me how I could be both a Zen practitioner and a martial artist. For them, this seemed to be a contradiction: one practice directed toward peace, the other, they assumed, devised to increase aggression and power.

The teacher who has influenced me most, Shoshin Nagamine (the karate teacher, historian and founder of Matsubayashi Ryu Karate,) was the Chief of Police on the Japanese island of Okinawa. He was also a well-known martial artist and, later in life, an ordained Zen practitioner. In his cultural milieu it was understood that there was no contradiction.

Let's say you have some water to give to a thirsty person. But no glass. No container of any kind to hold it. In that case the water would be useless. It would evaporate or drop to the ground and disappear. The thirsty person would have no way to make use of it. In the same way, we need a vessel to contain what is most precious to us.

We need a physical world. A body. Human relationships, love, work and purpose. We need to preserve the forms of things so their nature can be realized; their purpose, and ours, fulfilled.

The Dalai Lama's message of peace may be boundless, but is contained in his ineffable realized mind; conveyed in his language and actions; communicated by means of his physical presence at various times and places throughout the world. As he travels, his material body is protected by the warriors who are assigned to serve him. There is no contradiction. These functions act in concert.

As a police officer you are in a position to protect people. As a martial arts instructor you can help create the conditions in which people can develop health and strength, clarity and confidence. As a Zen practitioner you can attend to other needs of people: you can provide a setting and present a method by which they can grow in character and wisdom, and so approach the most perplexing and important questions we face as human beings: life and death; the reason for suffering; how to act in the moment of freedom.

The Dalai Lama does not have the same job as the people who protect him. But he needs them. And they need him. He provides them with their mission and the motive for them to exert themselves to the limit of their attention, skill, and commitment to their warrior path.

These functions – the defender and that which we defend – coexist in each of us, and in our communities and nations. We need to be sure they function in mutual support and with a single, just mission. Then we can be healthy and strong, and the world can be transformed.

Preserving the Treasure

Every moment of our lives is precious. Our human lives arise as a result of enormous good karma, accumulated by us over eons of practice and kindness and insight and suffering. Now we have the result of all that effort – a body healthy enough to practice, a mind clear and stable enough to practice, the good fortune to encounter dharma teaching, people with whom we can share our lives and who value practice.

We expend our lives quickly. All the good karma we have accumulated is easy to exhaust. Life runs down. Our time gets short. Our mind becomes cloudy. Our body does not remain ours. If we lose this chance to practice, we cannot hope to find another one very soon.

If we treasure what we have, if we study well, practice sincerely and behave with dignity and kindness, we will create conditions in our lives and in the lives of the people we touch which will produce future good results. If we dissipate the good fortune we have – pursuing things which, sought for their own sake, will not support us, things such as wealth, leisure, status, sexual activity, food – we become disturbed and dissatisfied, losing the chance to free ourselves from suffering, losing the chance to help the people who depend on us.

As human beings who have encountered the dharma – whether in Buddhist form, Christian form or some other form – we have a choice: to accumulate the causes and conditions for our future enlightenment, or to dissipate the good results of our own past actions that we now enjoy, and so cast our selves down into suffering.

By practicing with a calm clear mind, studying and contemplating with deep clarity, behaving in a kind and dignified manner – even if it is inconvenient, unconventional, difficult or lonesome – we can have the life we want: free from suffering, with the skill and energy to take care of whoever needs us.

As modern people we are taught to frame most questions of behavior as matters of personal freedom. As if yielding to every impulse, desire, attraction and fear were freedom. In fact, such an impulse-driven life, devoid of purpose, is slavery.

If we are thirsty, in the desert, and have a last cup of water, we could chose to liberate the water into the sand, freeing it from the arbitrarily imposed boundaries of the cup. Or we could contain it, protect it, and use it in a way that will benefit our selves and others. Oil can be used, if handled with care and skill by many well-trained people, to power the Dalai Lama's jet and the dharma center's heating system, or to help you get your kids to school and yourself to work. Or it can be liberated from its undersea prison, killing many fish and polluting the oceans. All "freedom" is not created equal.

Our life energy can be squandered on pleasure seeking, intoxication, manipulation, accumulation, lying and destroying. This way of living is advocated, vigorously, as good, around the world.

Or our life energy can be conserved, used carefully, to sustain ourselves and others. Through disciplined practice and wise action, we can use our precious lives well, and put an end to suffering, for ourselves and others, forever.

Life Is a Journey
(Please remain in your seats and enjoy the movie.)

The goal of Buddhism is to put an end to suffering for yourself and others, forever. Anything that does that is Buddhism. Anything that does not isn't.

The method for achieving this is training in three dimensions of human action: personal conduct, condition of mind, and understanding of how things exist.

The things you do to train in one of these areas will support the training in the other areas. They are not separate.

Avoid things like killing, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct, using intoxicants and indulging in disturbed states of mind like rage, envy or jealousy – and your ability to meditate deeply and see phenomena without distortion increases. The three trainings happen at once.

But pursuing the goal of Buddhism and undertaking these three trainings are highly countercultural now. The most potent forces in the world conspire to prevent us from living a life directed toward training well and putting an end to suffering.

On the contrary, we are continually urged — by human voices and our cultural and physical environment — to do things which increase our suffering and the suffering of the people around us.

How difficult is it to get a quiet half hour to meditate? It's hard to fit into your schedule regularly, it's hard to remember why it's that important, it's hard to sit, undistracted, with the sounds of the traffic and the TV and the computer, the tension in your knees and to do list that keeps hopping around your mind like a caged kangaroo.

Of course, you can go off to a meditation center for a \$600 weekend retreat. But then you have to get back to reality and sell some more stuff and sit through all the meetings and the road trips and the conference calls and the power point presentations to do what you need to do to get back there again on your next vacation.

We stay informed about the thousand controversial issues of our day. We have consumer choices; a thousand flavors of soda, our preferred micro brews, smooth or chunky, plain or peanut, classic or crispy, infinite channels to watch and sites to click, and we choose as we glance at our phones, tweet, facebook, like and dislike.

Watching actors is taken for granted. Body slack, mind slack, we engage in the imitation of action, watch other people pretend to do things — we forget that they are not actually doing the things we are watching them do but are pretending, and that they are not there, but are recorded. We forget that we cannot influence them, that our response to them is irrelevant to them, that we cannot engage in a discourse with them in which our humanity will be significant, but instead are relegated to the role of an impotent passive consumer of

their actions, with our only option to sit still and slack or change the channel and sit still and slack in front of another set of pretenders.

Most people do this for hours and hours a day. Most of us take for granted that we must live with minds churning, hearts unfulfilled, lives vaguely or profoundly dissatisfied. If we do not question this, we are easy to manipulate, degraded in will and vision, overwhelmed with trivia, sinking deeper into physical and mental weakness, seeking someone – some great leader, someone cool, someone powerful, someone focused, someone — anyone — who would help us dispel our unhappiness.

But no fuehrer — no matter how appealing, no matter how much we yearn for him or hope for her to do it — will put an end to human suffering. Only we can do it. Only by engaging whole heartedly in the three trainings of conduct, mind and wisdom.

Yes, it is countercultural. We are like paratroopers, dropped behind enemy lines, surrounded, with no option but to do our jobs as human beings, with complete commitment, and no thought other than rescuing all those who can be saved.

In the past, when I have questioned watching television, movies, computers, and so on, as a way of life, people have said, yeah, well, meditating is just sitting there wasting your time, so I would rather watch something.

This is a good misunderstanding, because it points to the heart of the matter. Achievers in all walks of life have powerfully focused minds. Watch a championship tennis player, a race car driver or for that matter a surgeon, musician, a Wall Street trader or a pilot. What you will see, as they perform, is focus. Part of the delight we get from observing their mastery is not the physical performance itself, but the utter unification of body and mind in skillful, purposeful action. That is achieved only after years of intentional practice.

Watch someone watch TV who has watched TV relentlessly for ten or twenty years, and the thrill will not be there.

But spend a moment with someone who has extracted themselves from the degradation of the modern cultural environment and who has spent a decade or two cultivating clarity of mind, and you will never forget them for as long as you live.

Better yet, you can be that person.

The Difference Between Past And Future

We live at the boundary between the past and future. This boundary is infinitely thin. It seems to move, the way a horizon seems to move as you approach it. But the horizon does not move. You move, and since the horizon exists only as your perception, it exists only relative to your position; it appears to move as well. If you stay still, the horizon also stays still. Its movement or fixed position are not illusions. They are real, but their real existence is contingent upon your perception.

The chief character of the past is its mechanical fixity. Although our memories may shift, appear, and disappear, what we have done is done, and the results of our past actions will bear fruit in the future. The chief character of the future is that it is constructed freely and by choice. The circumstances that arise out of past actions cannot be changed or controlled. But our response to them is completely open. Of course our response will be a result of past habits, but we can change those if we educate ourselves and have the presence of mind and the will to make the change. In this sense we are free to act.

So this present moment is the point of contact between our determined past and our liberated future. It moves when we move. That is, the present moment feels like it is continually slipping into the past at a rate that is determined by how much we are acting, that is, by the intensity of the karma we are creating. However, like the relative motion of the horizon, when we stop, it stops.

When the motion in the present time stops, we cease to create the karma that perpetuates our hurry and disturbance. The name of this cessation is nirvana, and the aspect of time in the unmoving present is called eternity.

In seated meditation we cultivate this way of settling and experiencing the present. However, this Samadhi – a calm, clear, present mind – is necessary, but not sufficient for, a complete end to suffering. To achieve that, Samadhi must be applied to a mind conditioned in wisdom.

The Cultivation of Simplicity

How are you doing?

Busy. Real busy.

We hear responses like this all the time.

Seeing someone we have not seen in a while, we take a quick, breathless pause from the pace of our life, and greet our old friend with a statement like this.

For a lot of us, it is the first thing that comes to mind.

Sometimes it is a statement of pride. The implication is that we are busy because we are important, in demand, engaged in the activities of life.

Sometimes it is a complaint: we are overtaxed, overscheduled, tired. Sometimes it is just a report of our condition. On the run.

In our modern world, we have lost the idea that the cultivation of a simple life has value; that a simple life is something to be sought for its own sake.

Nowadays, the phrase “a simple life” resonates with Paris Hilton and reality TV. It is a corruption of the phrase, a phrase that now indicates not simplicity at all, but rather a reduction in status, lack of sophistication and tedium.

But my teacher’s teacher emphasized, as one of his precepts of behavior for his students, that they should “Live a simple life.” He was a great figure in the modern martial arts, Chojun Miyagi, founder of Goju Ryu karate. If he recommended this, we ought to at least reflect on it and see why he felt it was so important.

I can’t answer for him. But I have an answer.

In our culture, from the earliest age, children are asked what they like and what they dislike. What flavor, what color, what subject, what activity... In the world of media our children inhabit, they are relentlessly enticed by appealing things — food, toys, experiences — and repelled by awful things, like the bad guy in the cartoon, or not having what you want.

They (and we) are taught to define ourselves by what we like and dislike. And to act on that basis to please ourselves, pursuing pleasurable things and eradicating non-pleasurable ones. It makes sense. It also puts people on an endless treadmill of dissatisfaction and distraction. Inclining us to do harm to get what we want and destroy what we don’t. Producing discord and suffering. Setting us on a course of action that will not bring

fulfillment or happiness. But what it will do is make us busy. The more you buy into it, the busier you get.

What if there was a better basis on which to make choices in our lives? What if we understood simplicity itself as a valuable thing?

Is simplicity for unmotivated losers who won't or can't compete? Is simplicity boring? There are people who would like you to think so.

As practitioners of martial arts, or of any other practice, we need to understand the value of the cultivation of simplicity. If we fail to recognize it, we will get lost in the superficial, in rank and ego, in posturing, the endless need for approval and acknowledgement that disturbs people and, when it goes on too long, keeps modern martial arts practice shallow and hollow and irrelevant to the genuine issues that we need to face squarely.

Without understanding the importance of simplicity in the life of a warrior or practitioner, we will fail to penetrate the critical issues of how to do effective self-defense and of how to live as a human being in the modern world.

What does it mean to cultivate simplicity? For one thing, we need to remember that we are talking about something you practice, something you cultivate. It is not a lifestyle choice, an aesthetic, a design sensibility, or a slogan.

The cultivation of simplicity is a habitual way of addressing the constant flow of disturbing emotions that arise in our heart and mind, that create distraction and encumbrances in our schedule and our relationships, and obstruct our breathing, posture, and the flow of energy in our bodies.

What do we do with the disturbing emotions that arise in our mind? People impelled to act on every desire, every irritation, appear unstable and undisciplined. They remain unaccomplished and unhappy. Their condition leads not to fulfillment, but exhaustion.

But engaging in deep disciplined practice, putting an end to the disturbances in the mind and eliminating the obstructions in the energy flow of the breath and body, has a different result. Consistent practice of martial arts and of meditation, for example – consistent and sincere practice, done daily, with the right technique and the right motivation – has an effect on our lives that is very different from attempting to find happiness “out there” somewhere.

It creates conditions through which we feel peaceful, and alive. It protects us from squandering our energy on useless hurry. It frees us to dedicate our energy and attention to the benefit and protection of the people who depend on us. It allows us to cultivate the skills of body and mind that will take us forward with decency, nobility, purpose and the calm, vigorous clarity that you can see in the unusual life of a Zen master or a genuine warrior.

Such people do exist. They are rare. You can be one. To be strong and free is only possible if you have a heart free from greed and hatred. To act spontaneously is only possible for a person who is well trained, and free from distraction.

That will not happen by chance. It will not happen if we permit ourselves to be encumbered with the endless concerns proposed to us by the cluttered cultural environment in which we modern people find ourselves.

It will only be possible if we take seriously Miyagi Sensei's admonition to live with simplicity. It will only be possible through the daily cultivation of simplicity. There is no one formula by which to proceed. It is up to each of us to find our way.

Kinhin

It is human to have a long and vertical spine. Also it is human to walk on two feet, with your head high, your breath free to move and your gaze flexible and alive.

This is not the posture of mind or body we assume at a computer or a desk, in a car or on a couch. Do we feel, under those circumstances, less than human?

We may not be able to escape these settings completely. But we can recover our humanity sometimes, and we can remember who we are. As we do that, memory will become more familiar to us, we can have our dignity and nobility back, and we can build a life as free people, not slaves to tools, desire and time.

Go to your back yard. Go to the roof top of your building. Go to a place in the park where you will not attract too much attention. Go to a churchyard, a museum, a basketball court, a cemetery, a mall, a quiet road, a tiny room, the hallway in the back of your office, the space between the couch and the TV in your living room.

Go there and quietly, without anyone noticing, place your palms together and tip your eyes down. Hold your left fist in your right. With your fists at the center of your chest and your elbows lifted, bring your life back to where you are. Where ever you are, leave the thoughts of what you did and what you need to do behind. Where ever you are, depart from all the things that you regret and want. Put your hands together and make your spine tall. Breathe easily under your belt and cast your gaze softly down. No one needs to know what you are doing. Take one step.

You can move forward one half step each time you take a breath. Let your mind settle down and be undisturbed by daydreams, distractions or desires. Not like a robot that is insensitive to the world. But as a human being who does not need to be caught by every impulse, sight or sound, or yearning. This is Kinhin, the Japanese name for walking meditation.

Make your spine tall. Hold your head high on your neck. Breathe way down under your belt. Take another step. Rolling your body weight from the ball of the rear foot to the heel of the front, there is a feeling of gliding forward, without sudden shifts of balance. You can do it at a slow pace. In an hour you might go once around the room.

You can go faster, at a normal walk, or you can go faster than that. But as you go, your head stays high, your breath stays free, your mind unburdened by concern and unoccupied by objects. Just open the hand of thought and hold on to nothing that arises in the mind. If you become distracted, return your attention to your spine and mind, tall and noble and human, and continue.

Do this for one hour each day. Or half an hour. Or for ten minutes. If you are too busy, then consider making a change in your life. We all need a way in this age, to recover the

humanity that is being leached away from us as we encounter more temptations and distractions, as we are encouraged to ditch our humanity for fun.

Do this for an hour a day at the same time each day. This is a practice. And it is a holy one. It is a practice because in order to fulfill the requirement of the form— the physical, mental and schedule demands it makes on us — we change our body, our mind, and the structure of our life. Because the result is good — that is, by conforming to the demands of this practice our minds settle down, insights arise, we are encouraged to recover our humanity and to recognize the humanity in others — it is a holy practice.

Just doing something a lot is not a “practice.” Doing something which requires us to give up our bad habits, create good ones, increase our health, decrease our disturbance, and recover the dignity, decency, and nobility which are really ours, really us, is a practice. A holy and wonderful one. One worth doing. Starting now.

Training in Interesting Times

We each will decide if it's a blessing or a curse, but we all are now living in interesting times. Interesting, because the veil of routine is lifted more frequently, revealing a character of experience less predictable, a future less amenable to assumptions than we once believed in.

One of the attributes of periods of social disorder, here and elsewhere, throughout space and time, is that the strong prey upon the weak. And fear becomes a habit. In stable times there is enough amity for decent people to band together to serve their mutual interest. Representative governments, a justice system, the rule of contracts, reliable currency, all depend upon this. Under stable conditions, people can recognize the utility of both competition and shared interests. The US Constitution is based on a distribution of power, so that each center of power acts as a restraint on the concentration of power, the arrogance that grows from that centralization, and the suffering that inevitably flows from it.

This carefully made fabric begins to unravel in interesting times. People use more of their energy for cruder aims and so have less for higher human aspirations. Vice is regarded as innocuous. Interesting times in medieval China, Russia or Europe exhibit the same properties as our own interesting times.

People, seeking happiness, forget how to find it. Thrift and industry are for suckers. Work is for chumps. Self-mastery and self-sacrifice in the service of others is thought to be effeminate and naive, if not corrupt. The sale of intoxicating drugs, pornography and gambling is regarded as entertainment, in the same category somehow, as Shakespeare, Milton, the Bible and the Brady Bunch. People make themselves slaves. Fear rules. Freedom, and life itself, are willingly sacrificed in the name of comfort, of personal choice.

The process by means of which people's lives are leached away by addiction to these poisons is overlooked or denied. The vessel that holds our precious life is broken.

Those of us who are practitioners recognize interesting times as part of the times of our lives. We don't welcome this; we don't reject it. We recognize that the path is sometimes smooth and sometimes rough. We proceed. We recognize that in the moment of violent confrontation, of physical or emotional shock, it will be too late to train. We will either be prepared at that moment or we will not. And we recognize that the time to prepare is now. This is the time we have. We need to use it well.

As practitioners, we understand that everything changes. That if we can create the conditions for propitious change we have a chance to prevail over every difficulty. But our time is short. Our physical strength, our clarity of mind, the leisure time in which we can train, the lives of the people who are depending on us for protection, all are limited.

If we wish to face the inevitable challenges of interesting times with equanimity and skill,

the time to prepare is now. We cannot wait even one day.

If we prepare ourselves, if we conduct ourselves with virtue and sincerity, if we face opposition and threats with courage and unstoppable purpose, there will be no problem we cannot face. Whatever the outcome, whatever the times demand, justice will prevail.

The Ark Of History

Look down the mountainside of time at the stories cultures tell about themselves, and you will see the rivalry between settlers and raiders.

Before history, there was a time when people, like animals, looked around for something to eat and a place to lie down at the end of the day. When they could not find anything good, they were hungry and tired. They were dependent on causes and conditions outside their control. But they learned. They learned to predict cycles of time and place. They learned to travel to places that were fertile. To find what was concealed. And they learned to cultivate: to farm the land and to herd animals. They learned skills, they worked hard, they worked together, and life was better for it.

Then one evening, when people are tired, and dinner is done, as night begins to cover the world, some raiders with clubs sneak into the village and smash the heads of the nearest settlers, terrify the others, take what they like, and disappear into the darkness.

Terror is only the first reaction. Then the settlers vow never to let this happen again. Their shock turns into determination, and their plans into action. Having overcome the capricious danger of the natural world, they now turn their attention to overcoming the threats from rival humans. They arm themselves. They post sentries. They build walls around their camps. They train. If their fortunes are good and their prosperity increases, then the threats to it will, too.

Raiders will attack again. The strategies will depend on a calculation of the magnitude of the threat and the values of the people under attack. Fight courageously to the last man, if that is what it will take: some people would rather die free than live as slaves. But not everyone feels that way. Maybe it will seem easier to pay the raiders off without fighting them. It is called paying 'tribute' in the stories, and it is how empires form and people are conquered.

Some of the settlers may reproach themselves in the aftermath of the attack. They will feel that their prosperity has made them weak. That comfort has given way to pleasure seeking. That the ethos of hard work, family life and self sufficiency that guided the lives of their ancestors, that succeeded so well in protecting the people from the ravages of nature, has given way to an ethos of indulgence, intoxication, sexual depravity, and corruption.

The raiders counted on the weakness of the settlers. After a while, they also noted that they themselves, the raiders, were as helpless as the pre-settled people were; as dependent on providence as the most hopeful hunter/gatherer. Because the treasure of the settled people was soon exhausted as the settlers lost their will to work, and the skills they once had were forgotten.

The raiders could crack the whip and kill the dragon of resistance, but after the delight of wading through the river of blood of their enemies, after taking everything and exhausting it, there was nothing left for them to take. And nothing left to do but fight among

themselves for the scraps.

These stories used to be told about the rise and fall of cultures: stories of vitality and decadence, raids and defense, heroism and treachery. That is the human tale. And it continues, unchanged, today.

It continues in the fortunes of nations, in the conflicts between races and parties and classes. The cycle is as true for empires and countries and companies and unions today as it was for tribes in olden times.

But more importantly, it is true for us. We can cultivate, or we can steal. And not just from others, but from ourselves. We can increase our karmic wealth by joyfully doing right, by being generous, by keeping our morality clean, by restraining our anger and greed, by seeing the hard-to-see truth that virtue has happy results and harm results in misery.

We came into this world with great good fortune. The fact that we were not eaten by wolves, that we didn't shrivel from hunger, is proof. That people took care of us and we had a safe place to stay, is a blessing. We should appreciate it. That we have the health to move with skill and without pain, that we have the intelligence to understand things and to speak about them, is the result of our past good acts.

It is possible for us to raid ourselves and to squander our karmic fortune: we can do drugs, steal, lie, cheat people, kill them, take what is theirs and, upon the basis of blessings we have received in the form of a human body and mind, squander these blessings, exhaust the goodness we now enjoy, get only suffering for ourselves, and bring only suffering to other beings in this world.

Or we can cultivate our lives. We can see what it takes to create happiness in this world and do it. All it takes is courage and skill, kindness and vision. We do not have to succumb to conventional values, even if we live in an age of decadence. We do not have to settle or raid. We can use our lives as best we can, to save others from suffering.

We have this opportunity right now. It will not last.

Hey

Have you gotten enough advice lately? I have. I have also had plenty of input. I wonder if, like me, you are all set with insights, suggestions, hints, recommendations, people encouraging you to think what they think, and with charming or passionate pleas regarding what to do, buy, feel and want.

I'm just saying.

I notice a lot of people are just saying. They are just feeling, too. Feeling desire for the things they want. Objects, status, ideas, people, etc. They are not too sure about how to get what they want, or to create the world they want to live in, so they speak up.

Advertisers, politicians, entertainers, athletes, experts and opinionizers all raising their voices and sending their words and images our way, catching our attention and persuading us in that moment to engage with them, to dovetail our desires with theirs.

It has not worked, though.

Because generally speaking, the motive for all their talk is not love for you. Most of the time, most of them just don't have the time to care too much if your life is better or if you find some peace, love and/or happiness in this cool and turbulent world. That, nothing personal, is your problem. Not that they might not like you if they met you or something, but as they speak out across the culture, our happiness is not really on the table. What *they* want is on the table.

That is why the messages are at once enticing and cold-hearted. That is why the result of these public messages is a rush of attraction and connection followed by hollowness and disappointment.

If we move through this world bothering others, we will be restless, lonely, frustrated and exhausted. Continuing along that path is death.

By choosing instead to follow a path, even if it's a solitary path, of purposeful practice, we can have life instead. We need not tolerate the noise and meanness of the world. We need not engage with it directly, since trying to suppress it is like trying to calm an ocean by smashing down its waves.

By purposeful practice I mean be generous when you can help;

don't get angry when you are provoked;

treat other people decently, and let them have your respect. Let what they aspire to matter to you;

let your mind settle down to a deep peaceful state that you can carry around with you; get so good at it you can move vigorously through the turbulent world in peace;

take joy in living your life, helping where you can and leaving people alone when you are through;

see deeply enough to understand that no amount of goods, power over others, or pleasurable experiences will ever create a single moment of happiness for you or anyone else;

that the only thing that can ever last as you pass through this life and as you pass through the portal of death is your kindness and decency.

We cannot do these things just because they seem like a good idea. We can only do them by cultivating them as skills, little by little, humbly beginning, now, recognizing our limits and, if we persist without skipping steps, becoming a hero in this world.

Having this practical purpose, to train ourselves to be free of suffering, so that we can help others find their way out too, will allow our hearts and minds to return to peace and to power. There is no other way to do it.

The New Elite

As you practice, your life will change. If you practice meanness, you will find that the world around you and the world far off are getting cruel and cold.

If you practice strength, kindness and courage, your life will also change, and the world around you will appear to change, too.

If you are vain and mean, the elite of this world will appear to you to be movie stars and millionaires. It will appear to you that the world runs on ambition; that people can't be trusted, that luck governs fortune, that fame and pleasure, money and power are great to have, and that they are mostly in the hands of undeserving others. It will seem that way no matter how rich or poor you are, how famous or obscure. Envy and dissatisfaction will goad you relentlessly.

If you practice strength, courage and kindness, and you place your achievements in the service of others, then the elite of this world will appear to be a group defined not by status or ambition, wealth or power, but by their accomplishment in service, honor and virtue. You will recognize in the crowd and in the faces of the people around you, something warm and trustworthy, something to love and admire, something to lean on when you are in need, something to protect when you can, something to emulate for the rest of your life.

Seeing the ordinary beauty of the members of this new elite, you can feel nourished in their presence, by their words and example. There will be no question of being alone in this world; you cannot be alone when you are connected through the heart to the lives of these noble beings.

As your own practice of virtue deepens, their accomplishments will become more admirable and clear to you. And at first it may seem stunning that their achievements go unrecognized and are not universally praised. But little by little it becomes clear that their reward is their action and the condition of their own life; that they are repaid in kind many times over, with every act of kindness, clarity and strength, with every move they make, every breath they take; they are with you, and you are with them. Throughout space and time, not bound by disturbance or fear, not limited by accumulation or desire, you can see this new elite make ready the means and act.

Join this elite if you can. Practice well. Guard your body against error and your mind against ignorance.

Take good care of each other.

Karma Burns

The result of your past actions, your karma, flowers in the form of your life. Every perception every moment, every sensation, is a direct result of what you have done in the past.

If you have done wrong and you face it, recognize it for what it is, and determine never to do it again, the bad results caused by what you did will eventually end.

If you do good and continue to do it, the quality of your life will sweeten, and good people will be drawn to you, and corrupt people will not want to be around you.

Karma burns. So people who appear to have a pleasurable and easy life will soon lose that pleasure and ease if they fail to recognize the source of their pleasure and ease. If they recognize the source of it as their past good deeds, then they will continue to bring blessings into the world, and their lives can continue to bear the fruit of their past good actions.

If they ignorantly believe that they simply are better than everyone else and will always inevitably stay comfortable and rich and beautiful, and therefore feel themselves to be free to engage in harmful acts, then they will lose their comfort and ease and beauty, and their lives will bear the fruit of their harmful acts. This is how elites collapse and empires fall and inheritances are squandered and democracy ends and youth fades and old age is wasted and seniors in high school become freshmen in college.

Karma burns. One angry word to someone you love can undermine decades of trust and consideration. So we must be constantly vigilant about what we do. And we need to be scrupulous in studying what to do and what to avoid.

Your mind, according to Buddhism, is pervaded by three poisons. These three poisons cause all your suffering. Eliminate them from your mind and you will put an end to suffering for yourself and others forever.

The three poisons are attachment, aversion and ignorance. Ignorance means not understanding how things work. In Buddhism ignorance does not specifically refer to a lack of factual knowledge, but to wrong beliefs; beliefs like life is a crap shoot, life sucks, life is good, or that good results will come from doing wrong.

Ignorance leads to attachment and aversion. Attachment means we try to get things in order to make ourselves happy without understanding that these things do not have the capacity to make us happy. Aversion means we try to destroy things we don't like, believing that once they are out of existence we will be happy. Neither of these strategies works. They do not work, because we do not correctly perceive how things exist and what it is that causes us to suffer. And the increased suffering caused by our failed attempts to get happy by acting ignorantly on the basis of attraction and aversion deepens our disturbance and

our ignorance.

That is why, at the very center of the traditional “Wheel of Life” painting, the one that is supposed to be posted at the door of every Buddhist temple in the world, we will find a graphic representation of the three poisons. They are the engine, spinning the wheel of samsara, the cycle of suffering life.

They are depicted as a rooster chasing a snake chasing a pig chasing the rooster... in an endless accelerating circular race to nowhere. A race very much like the life many of us modern people live.

The rooster represents desire, because the rooster, just in case you have not worked on a farm recently, chases after every nearby hen at all times and would like to engage in fowl play with the nearest one, even if they are not in love or have no long term commitment or even if he does not know the first thing about her. Like a rock star, orgy-goer or professor intoxicated by desire, he just can't help it and could not think of a reason why he should.

The snake represents aversion or anger or hatred because the snake, in case you have not wandered in a tropical paradise lately, is inclined to sink his poisoned fangs into any creature who strolls nearby. Just because.

The pig chases after the rooster and the snake, or in some paintings, is shown with the snake and the rooster running out of his mouth, because the pig is so stupid and ignorant. Science tells us they do well on standardized animal tests, but when you look at what they eat and how they lay about in anything, you can see how they could look like a good representation of ignorance.

Some people think they can get away with anything and if they are clever enough, it will have no consequences. Crooks think they can lie, steal and cheat all the time, that everyone does it, and that when they get caught they are being singled out for harassment.

People think if they can just have sex all the time, take drugs all the time, eat rich food all the time, then they will be happy. Pornographers, junk food makers, Hollywood distracters, and drug dealers believe that although they are infecting the lives of millions of people with poison and misery, they are justified in this act either because they have suffered themselves or because only the strong survive, so tough luck everybody. They worship false gods. Drug dealers may believe if they burn candles to the angel of death, then the angel will like them, favor them, and protect them from their enemies. But it doesn't.

These are ignorant acts and ignorant beliefs. There is no happiness in them and no salvation in them. We will need to renounce them to get out of suffering.

There is permanent and complete happiness in training the mind to be strong, the heart to be kind and the mind to be clear and calm. There is no other way, and there are no exceptions. To be in a position to read this good advice is the result of the enormous good

karma that you have accumulated by what you have done in the past.

We need to use the small amount of good karma we have left in this life to create the causes for our own enlightenment: to put an end to ignorance and suffering for ourselves and others forever.

Buddhism and the Three Trainings

The objective of Buddhism is to put an end to suffering. The means to this end is through training in three dimensions of life.

One is our ability to act in a wholesome and ethical way towards ourselves and others. In Buddhist terms this is training in Sila. We can accept the idea that it takes training, first to get the knowledge of what to do and what to avoid, and then to develop the strength and presence of mind to actually live up to our moral ideals.

The second is to develop a calm, clear mind. It is easy for many of us to see the benefit of having a calm, clear mind. We want an antidote to our hyper-stimulated cultural environment and to our turbulent inner environment, in which our mind, reeling from engagement with media and hurry, churns with thoughts and feelings and desires and gives us too little peace. Training the mind to settle down and develop the ability to focus on one thing clearly and with stability for an extended period of time, is the training in Samadhi, or meditation.

The third is the training in wisdom, or Prajna. It is intelligence, the opposite of ignorance, or you might say it is the insight that dispels ignorance. A good thing, since ignorance is the cause of suffering, and an end to ignorance is the end of suffering.

Training in wisdom means understanding the way things actually exist. And that is where you lose a lot of people, because we all think we understand the way things actually exist. 'It's not the way things exist,' we think, 'that is the problem. It is the fact that nice things that I cannot have exist, and crappy things I have to put up with exist, too. I know how they exist.'

But it *is* the problem. It is the fundamental problem of our lives. We do not notice the degree to which our minds fabricate our reality and cause us to suffer — because we act on the basis of beliefs about reality that do not correspond to the way things actually exist. And this is what the training of Prajna addresses.

Here is an example: People say China invaded Tibet. That the Chinese killed many Tibetans and suppressed Tibetan culture. Therefore the Chinese are bad or misguided. People say that Mao's agricultural policies led to the mass starvation of 50 million Chinese. These policies were implemented by Chinese people. And they were also resisted by Chinese people. And they harmed Chinese people. And of course the hundreds of millions of Chinese alive and prospering now may feel benefitted, in the long run, by these policies. The fact that you can redefine Chinese to be good and evil, harmed and helped, and so on infinitely, tells you that when you talk about the Chinese, you are referring to something that is made up. It is a label placed on a concept that has nothing to correspond to it in reality. We are projecting a convenient fiction onto an imaginary object and changing the definition and the object as our mind shifts. We do this not just with the idea of the Chinese people but with every object our mind touches. This is not to say that

objects do not exist. They do. It is not to say that objects do not have qualities, or that all existence is subject to our fantasies or whims. No way. And Buddhism does not say so. Buddhism teaches us that to see things as they are, not as we project and define them, we need to be kind and decent toward ourselves and others, so that our minds can settle down sufficiently to allow us to see the process by which we filter and process our experience and impose our beliefs, assumptions and mental habits upon our perceptions, unintentionally.

Only in this way can we see reality as it actually exists, only then can we come face to face with our own mind and with the infinite body and mind of the Buddha: our own nature.

For now, when you hear people talking about America, Democrats, Republicans, rich people, trailer parks, urban youth, cars or money, or infinite other things, you will know there is more to the story.

Life & The Scenery of Life

Imagine yourself five hundred years ago. The Emperor has handed you a message. It is urgent. You need to deliver it across the empire, half a world away. If you succeed, he tells you, you will receive a great treasure. If you fail, you will die.

In this case, you will take your mission seriously. Under this circumstance, you will do whatever it takes to succeed. You set out. Along the way, you will encounter all sorts of terrain. There will be lush regions. You will be tempted to stay, to enjoy the comforts there, to delay.

You will have to cross hostile terrain. You will come upon difficult, dangerous regions that are inhospitable to life. You will be tempted to give up. To turn back.

If your comfort is foremost in your mind, you will never complete your mission. All will be lost, and you will die. If, however, you never lose sight of your ultimate goal, if the urgency of your mission is always clear in your mind, no matter what your outward circumstances, you will never be distracted by the changing scenery around you. You will notice your environment, of course. It will matter. You will have to adjust to accommodate its demands. But the immediate conditions will never be as important as fulfilling your mission.

Our lives as practitioners are like this. There will be attractions along our way that may distract us and tempt us to wander from our path. There will be times when our practice will feel barren and arid, not satisfying, not delightful, not even interesting. We will be tempted to delay or to give up.

If we recognize the ultimate purpose of our training — the purpose our practice serves us daily, and the ultimate reward that it offers us, the complete fulfillment of our potential and our mission as human beings — we will never be distracted by the shifting scenery of our lives.

Free from distractions, we can travel the paths of life freely, energetically, firm in our conviction that what we are doing is right, and utterly essential.

I wish you and all practitioners complete fulfillment of their goal.

Sunday

I wonder if there was a time when people walked down the street on a Sunday afternoon. When they saw their neighbors, they smiled, and a greeting came naturally, because it was a pleasure to see them. And then people would stop a little while, and they would see how each other was doing. And maybe invite them in.

I have heard about it. I think it's true.

Those old time people didn't define themselves by what they owned or who they wanted to have sex with. They did not trumpet their status, and they were not driven mad by what they wanted or detested. And I don't think that was because they were stupid or ignorant or dead or white. I think it was because they had learned to behave decently, understood there was evil in the world, and understood the usefulness of a loving heart and a peaceful day and kind words to a friend.

They understood that while things may go very wrong, our response to them is a choice. We cannot stop a tsunami or a hurricane, but whether we act like Japan or New Orleans is a choice.

Where people are treated with affection and respect and discipline by their parents when they are young, they are free to be kind and strong and generous and determined when they grow up. When they are abused and neglected as children, they are likely to grow up enslaved.

It takes a peaceful mind to think well. Turbulence, anger and desire constrict our freedom to think. If we can settle down enough, we can see our mind in action. We can see our mind at work. Making patterns where there are none. Missing surprises. Without settling down we will never see it. And we will not even have the time to learn what to look for.

If our mind is not calm enough to stroll down the street in the spring sunshine pleased to see a neighbor it is not calm enough to be enlightened. We will just keep suffering.

What We Value

We all value something. Each person may value different things, but very rarely is that thing hidden from the people around us. What we do, how we conduct our lives, shows what we value. Our ideals — what we profess to value — may differ from our practical conduct. In that case it is our conduct which reveals what we value. If we observe a discrepancy between our ideals and our actions, if we are honest, if we are courageous, we have an opportunity to correct our behavior and recover our values.

If we look around, we will see acts which reveal that people value money over other things. We will see people running after financial security, or status, or physical comfort, or pleasure. They will rig the system, steal the wealth and destroy the work ethic of a nation for their own greed. They will justify it, argue for it, even call it good. But that will not disguise what they value most.

People will sacrifice their own children if this will provide them with something they value more. This is commonplace, not rare. People will overthrow the wisdom of ages, their own beliefs, the values of their parents, the well being of their friends, communities or nations, cause great suffering, in the pursuit of what they value most.

So it is worth examining what we value. Not just because great harm or great good can come from our actions, but because our lives, our time to act, is short. And because once we have taken action, like a bullet fired from a gun, although we might later repent, we can never take back what we have done.

We all face this challenge at all times. I have faced it starkly in law enforcement settings as well as in the dojo.

I did not create a dojo to offer a recreational activity. Recreational activities were already available in 1987, and they still are. I created a dojo to provide a furnace for the alchemical transformation of body and mind. A place where we could immerse ourselves in a process by which, through the persistent and skillful application of our own will, we could strengthen our minds, make our bodies more intelligent, fuse our body and mind into a single coherent being, and dedicate ourselves to putting an end to suffering, for ourselves and others, forever.

In law enforcement, the challenges to being consistent in ideals and practice are similar to those presented in operating a dojo, or any other walk of life.

We live in a decadent society. That is to say, the institutions of society are often failing to achieve the objectives for which they were created. In the martial arts dojo and in law enforcement, we preserve values which are out of style. Values like honor, discipline, diligence, self sacrifice, courage, humility and duty.

To live these ideals, on the street or in the dojo, is a difficult, countercultural, but essential,

mission.

As a law enforcement officer, I took an oath to protect and serve. Do I think I am protecting Las Vegas, pornographers, drug dealers, Hollywood, Big Brother, subprime mortgage lenders, evildoers, and the other destroyers of virtue?

People involved in these things use the same justification for their acts: "If I didn't do it someone else would," "People enjoy it," "That's my money in their pocket," "It is what people want," "I don't judge, I am a businessman," "We all need to eat," "If people are stupid enough to get involved with this, they deserve what they get." They all say these things.

Those are not the people and institutions I serve. To the best of my ability, I am taking care of people who are in fear, who are being taken advantage of, who are being threatened or harmed.

But this service is not only the objective of the mission; it is also a means to achieve it.

This understanding is similar to the way I ran my dojo.

The point is not that we can succeed in permanently eradicating evil or weakness or vanity. The point is that we give our best effort to restrain them and combat them throughout our lives. To the degree that all our skill, effort, energy, lifetime, is devoted to this in practice, we live a noble human life.

If we get side-tracked, if we succumb to laziness, self centeredness, careerism, pleasure-seeking, we will eventually lose all the things we did wrong to attain. And then the story of our short human life is, at the end, a story of total loss.

If we dedicate ourselves to the transformation of body and mind through virtuous action, we will take our deeds with us forever.

Good luck with your training.

The Nature of Water

The Niagara River looks powerful as it flows slowly, mile after mile. In an instant, without any hint of what is coming, it reaches the falls and explodes into thundering torrents and sprays as it crashes into the rocks below. It roils and spins and settles down, forming a slow, deep river once again.

So what is the water really like? What is the true nature of the water? Deep and peaceful? Chaotic and violent? Misty? Powerful?

The quality of the water is subject to conditions. Under some conditions it is one way. When conditions change it is another way. It adapts to the conditions as they change.

What is our true nature? Turbulent? Peaceful? Wise? Impulsive?

We also adapt to the conditions in which we find ourselves. The difference between ourselves and water is that we can determine the conditions in which we live.

We do not have to be turbulent, angry, greedy, stupid, helpless, or hurt. We can choose, and we can act. If we learn what to do, gain the skills we need, and then acting wisely, we can create the best conditions for our own lives.

Unexpected conditions will arise. One day we may go over the falls. But if we have trained wisely and well, we will recognize the conditions for what they are, adapt to them and accommodate them, without fear or clinging.

When people came to my dojo, sometimes they would tell me what kind of person they were. They would say, "I am not flexible." Or "I am very strong."

Whatever words they use to describe themselves, whatever attributes they thought they possessed or lacked, the fact is that none of it accurately described them. It described their current condition. If they attributed these characteristics to themselves as if they were fixed, they would ultimately lose their strength (by complacency) or fail to overcome their weaknesses (by failing to make effort.)

If, on the other hand, they entered into training with wisdom, that is to say, entered into a setting in which the conditions furthered their own inner and outer development, they would get the results they wanted. They would become who they wished to be. But only by acknowledging that our "true nature" does not describe some permanent inherent characteristic which we possess, but the fact that we are subject to conditions and reflect a universe – of our own making or otherwise.

Once a year we would ring the huge Chinese iron bell in our dojo.

For the rest of the year, the bell would remain silent at the front of our dojo. During every practice, every class, every meditation session it stood still and quiet, suspended on its stand.

Then once a year, on New Year's Eve, the deep sound of the bell would resonate through our bodies, through our dojo, through our building, and ring out across the whole neighborhood. The bell has no nature of creating a great sound. But when the conditions are right, it rings out loud and strong. When the conditions are withdrawn, silence returns.

It works the same way in our own hearts and minds. We create the conditions in which we live. This is how we become who we are.

Morning Practice

The custom of morning prayer and meditation is missing from our modern lives, and this lack is harmful. By setting off in the proper direction in the morning, we can change the character of our day and our life. This should become part of our life, part of our training, whether we are practicing martial arts or anything else.

It seems that in effect, many of us prepare ourselves for our day by first having an alarm go off, either an electronic buzzer or the jangling sound of news, weather, dj's yucking it up, or commercials with music and meaningless messages pumping into our ears.

Then we prepare our minds for the day by rushing through morning activities — getting dressed, having breakfast, traveling to the office, store or factory. We do not pay close attention to all these steps. They seem to be obstacles to get past on the way to the rest of our day.

This feeling of not doing what we are doing wholeheartedly, but instead just sort of getting through what we are doing in order to get to the next thing and the next thing on the schedule, is a mental habit that infects our lives more and more, if we let it.

We lose our whole lives this way. We may lose them suddenly, by failing to be fully present, mentally, at a moment of crisis, or slowly, by losing all the time we have.

Our time just disappears, and as it does, the things we do are drained of meaning. You do not have to be some kind of tender, passive, pious, sensitive, religious-acting person to appreciate and benefit from making a mental habit of doing exactly what we are doing, when we are doing it, with wholehearted attention, conviction and focus.

An athlete, soldier, surgeon, pilot, musician, and everyone else whose job is demanding, must be able to be in the moment (even though the phrase "be in the moment" may sound like a cliché, we should not let it be deprived of its meaning by trivialization and casual overuse.)

Starting the day with a morning prayer and meditation as part of our practice begins to aim our life toward presence of mind. By placing our attention on our present activity, we make each moment of life meaningful, more and more so as time goes on. In this way, we can begin to condition our mind, just as most of us practice to condition our body and perfect our technique.

We should understand that living in the present moment does not mean living impulsively, living for immediate gratification, or neglecting the future. Planning and preparing are essential functions for human life. Everyone from farmers to monks to generals to kings has to do it. It is no different for clerks, tradesmen, artists, business people, professionals, managers, parents, students, or anyone else.

As Zen Master Dogen, writing in 13th century Japan, said in his essay on monastery life called Instructions to the Cook:

"Prepare for tomorrow as the work of today."

That is, when you plan, just plan and have your mind fully in the present action of planning, just as you would have it in the present action of doing whatever it is you are doing at that moment.

Morning prayer in the Buddhist tradition does not consist of only praise, supplication, or the hope to receive benefit from an outside agency beyond our control. It is a complete action in itself. When we place our minds on the wish that all our actions throughout the day will benefit all beings, that wish itself has an effect on our mind and on our actions and on the way we will see the world that day.

It may be a subtle influence at first, but with practice in the sincere aspiration to pursue the benefit of all beings, the effect of the morning prayer and meditation becomes profound. The entire character of our lives changes, and this helps to orient us in our transformative intention every day, again and again.

In his teaching "Virtue and Reality," contemporary Tibetan Buddhist teacher Lama Zopa says: "No matter how you lead your daily life... if you never let compassion leave your mind, if you constantly keep in mind the thought of benefiting others, everything you do becomes work for the welfare of others."

This constant self-reminder is essential for us as martial artists. The more vigorous our practice, the more relevant it is to our daily life, and the more practical the effect of the reminder is. If we are engaged in dojo practice, becoming stronger daily, with increasing influence on our juniors, training partners and the other people in our life, the effect of this kind of morning practice becomes more important as our martial arts career progresses.

If we are engaged in bringing our martial training to bear on others through law enforcement or the military, with modern methods, tactics and weapons in immediate practical application of our skills, then it is even more important to be vigilant about our motivation, the condition of our mind, and the action of our body. This conditioning does not make us weaker or modify our ability to act decisively and forcefully. It enables us to think clearly, act wholeheartedly, and to know that what we do is correct.

Do Not Look Around or Step Out During Class

For martial arts practice to produce good results, a sharp, clear mind must be cultivated. This is not difficult. But generally we do not know why we should do it, and all of our lives are set up in a way that discourages it. We are continually distracted, entertained, multi-tasking, game playing, stimulated, conned, cajoled, sold, repelled, charmed and enticed.

So when we go to the dojo to train, we do not immediately understand why we should not look around, not succumb to the attractions of sense stimulation in our environment, not yield to the impulses that arise from our own sense. Why not? We are told from the earliest age that yielding to impulses, that finding satisfaction for our desires and preferences, is freedom.

This is an article of faith that upon examination proves to be false. It is not a source of freedom. It is slavery. In thrall to delight, we pursue an ever-receding horizon of satisfaction. We set up a habit of mind that can never be satisfied, never be at peace, is always in a condition of unfulfilled wanting. We make ourselves a slave to impulse and pleasurable sensations.

The inhibition of impulse is our chief source of freedom. It follows that we need to cultivate this.

In the course of a karate class, there are many distractions around us. If we focus not on those distractions, but on the condition and presence of our own mind, we develop a great power. In the heat and chaos of combat, we cannot permit our minds to follow distractions. We need to exclude unnecessary information and lead with our intention.

In karate training, we cultivate sharp and powerful intention. Not a floating mind, but a determined and focused mind which is not robotic, not mechanical. This is our chief advantage and source of freedom.

Buddhism And The Martial Ideal

The warrior ideal is a central metaphor in Buddhism. Although it has not been well understood in the West, the warrior ideal and the influence of warrior culture have been central to the practice tradition at the heart of Buddhist doctrine. The loss of this understanding here and now is due in part to the cultural prejudice of the Westerners who were first attracted to Buddhism. But as Western practitioners have matured, they have begun to rediscover this dimension of practice.

People are skeptical of the association of Buddhism with martial arts. This is understandable. There have been plenty of instances where a thin patina of Asian culture has been overlaid on martial arts, in the hopes of giving an appearance of depth.

There have been instances where powerful tools developed in the Buddhist tradition for the purpose of bringing an end to suffering for all beings have been appropriated by martial artists and put to distinctly non-Buddhist ends. The tools I am referring to include the development of Samadhi – single pointed meditation which enables the experienced practitioner to place his or her mind on any object or no object and keep it there with clarity and stability for as long as he or she wants to.

Samadhi in the Buddhist practice tradition is cultivated to permit meditators to observe the subtle working of their mind, and escape the confusion of disturbed mental states. But concentration is a requirement of many other highly developed activities which may have no spiritual objectives at all: piloting a plane in a storm, hitting a baseball before 50,000 fans, trading stocks while watching half a dozen monitors, fighting a deadly opponent – all demand deep concentration.

So who could blame the casual observer, the first time visitor to a Buddhist conference, or the middle-aged American dharma practitioner, for being skeptical of the validity of the relationship between genuine dharma practice and the martial arts?

Yet war metaphors and warrior ideals pervade Buddhist teaching. With this perspective, we can discover how a truly Buddhist martial art might be practiced.

The historical Buddha was born (in India, 2500 years ago) into the Kshatriya, or warrior, caste. He was the son of a king, at a time when warfare was common and military culture was dominant.

Robert Thurman, professor of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Studies at Columbia University writes:

Since Shakyamuni (the historical Buddha), born in India 2500 years ago, whose teachings are still alive in the world now, was born into a world of widespread violence and militarism, he had to turn to teaching practical techniques of spiritual liberation which relied upon the martial qualities of toughness, asceticism, and determination in the pursuit of the goal of enlightenment...

The Buddhist method was discovered, mastered, supported and disseminated by people who were, at a formative stage of their careers, great warriors. An example from ancient India was King Ashoka who, after a long and bloody struggle for power, conquered a vast empire on the Indian subcontinent. When the period of expansion ended, and the time for consolidation and peace arose, he searched among the competing religious and philosophical traditions of his world for the best way to encourage civil harmony, personal fulfillment and human good.

He became the greatest proponent of Buddhism in early India. His legacy lives on today in the hundreds of “Rock Edicts,” carved bas relief stone pillars he had erected all over his kingdom. The carvings include written advice for personal conduct, and present the human values that formed the basis for early popular Buddhism in ancient India.

His contribution to Buddhist monasteries and universities deepened Buddhist culture, with an influence felt from his era in the 2nd century through to the 11th, when Muslim armies invaded, burning the libraries and razing the monasteries, ending the Buddhist era in India.

The second wave of Buddhist learning spread across Asia by means of the greatest military conquest in history. Buddhism, once again, was spread not by force, but by a military leader who became Buddhist after the military aspect of his career, was over. In the 12th century the Mongols conquered most of the known world.

Led by Genghis Khan, an army of mounted herdsmen from the steppes of central Asia conquered – by massacre, terror and intimidation – an area from the Pacific Ocean, across China, west into Europe, and south into Vietnam. Within two generations, this invasion became the Yuan Dynasty of China.

Kublai Khan, grandson of Genghis, and himself a great general, was Emperor. Through his emissaries, he searched the known world for the most profound understanding of life, the clearest way to approach the human condition, and the best solution to the problem of human happiness. This brought him to Buddhism.

Although his regime made no effort to suppress the influential and competing forms of religion and philosophy — Confucianism, Taoism and many others — it was Buddhism that became the de facto state religion. It was his court that first bestowed the title on the emperor’s favored dharma teacher: “Dalai Lama,” meaning “Ocean of Wisdom.”

To understand the significance of the conversion of these military leaders, and the profound appeal of Buddhism to them, it is useful to understand something about their military life. There were several factors that gave the Mongols such a huge military advantage over the peoples they conquered.

Until they began to range from central Asia they lived as pastoral people. They herded

animals, goats and sheep for food, as well as horses for work. They were on horseback for most of their lives. It was completely natural to them. They were used to herding animals – very similar to controlling enemy armies. They were used to working from horseback. They were used to killing. There was not much land for them to cultivate in the high, dry plains they lived on. Mostly, it was just fertile enough for grazing.

Killing people was not something that required a whole new skill set. They were used to hardship. They were used to camping and moving. At a time when armies on the march were destroyed by disease as often as enemies, it was a huge advantage to have ingrained cultural habits of mind and body that allowed people to stay healthy on the move.

The method Genghis used initially was effective. The Mongol army would arrive at a town and demand submission. If it was not forthcoming, they would kill everyone. They did this for a while, and soon word got around. After a while towns capitulated without a fight. The armies kept advancing.

The Mongols were not spreading democracy. They had no interest in winning hearts and minds. They wanted everything and would stop at nothing to take it. And the boss of this outfit was the one who converted to Buddhism. And promoted the spread of the dharma throughout China and southeast Asia and beyond. How do you figure that one?

After a long series of victories in war, the conduct of Genghis Khan and King Ashoka changed. Theirs represents a very different model from that of the would-be conquerors of the modern era. And the implications for our own lives today are profound.

In both cases, there was a shift during their reign from warfare, which brought them to power, to a policy of education and harmony. Contrast this with the example of the dictators of the last century who rose to power by means of violence. The leaders of the Soviet Union, for example, used mass murder as a technique of conquest, and used it along with a policy of cultural repression as a means to hold on to power. Their empire collapsed. There are numerous recent examples of this.

Even with a purely Machiavellian motive to retain a grip on power, the use of force as a means for doing it will fail. It will exhaust the resources of the conqueror as it destroys the empire. From recent examples, we can see that evil in power will destroy itself, as well as the good that it feeds on. Evil cannot survive on its own.

The need for a shift in mode from conquest to rule is well observed through history. The British acknowledged it in their colonial period. In the philosophy of samurai era Japan, the principle was expressed with two kanji characters, “Bun/Bu.”

On the wall of my dojo hung two pieces of calligraphy, each a rendering of these two characters. Each was a gift given to me by a great modern master.

One was given to me by Sensei Ryuhei Taneya, in 1987, when he was about 80 years old.

Sensei Taneya at that time was the coach of the Japanese national Kendo (swordfighting) champion. The champion was a Tokyo police officer, a huge and powerful man known by his last name, Nishiyama.

I was watching a set of matches in which challengers from all over the world, ranked Fifth Degree black belt and higher, were invited to come forward and challenge the champion. One after another, these highly skilled swordsmen, in traditional Japanese armor, attacked. Nishiyama defeated each one. He often sent them falling backward, and occasionally, flying back across the mats. When the defeated challengers took off their headgear, they were flushed and seething. Nishiyama took off his, after thirty or so matches. He was smiling pleasantly.

His power and speed, and his intimidating presence, were obvious. Even at rest, he radiated calm power. Yet when Sensei Taneya took him aside and counseled him, his bearing shifted, just slightly, as he leaned toward the older man half his size, and humbly took in the insights his teacher imparted to him.

It is an honor to meet people of that level of accomplishment. Even more so to see them in action. Sensei Taneya had seen me bow on entering his training area at the beginning of the session. He asked me, through a translator, a mutual friend, who I was and why I bowed. I told him. It was after that that he gave me the gift of his “Bun Bu” calligraphy that hung in my dojo.

Years later, on Okinawa, I trained with Sogen Sakiyama, Roshi. He was once a great goju ryu karate practitioner. When I practiced with him, he was the senior Zen master on Okinawa, in his 70's at that time. For years we corresponded through frequent letters about how to live a life of practice.

After a few years, I returned to Okinawa and trained with him intensively, in the Zendo and face to face. One evening, with a group of students gathered around, he brought out his ink and brushes, and with a dramatic Zen master's flourish, brought his brush down on the square of paper and wrote two bold characters: Bun Bu. That was his message to me at that critical moment in my practice life.

The mastery of both Bun and Bu were considered essential for the development of the individual — and for the health of society — in samurai era Japan.

Bu means war. In this context, it refers to martial arts, the arts of war-making and the use of force in maintaining social order. The character itself includes a radical (a component of a compound Chinese character) representing a sheathed sword, not a drawn sword.

Anyone who will have to use force in conducting his duties can confirm that implicit strength is a better way to keep order than deployed strength. For example, the deterrent effect of a police department on crime is much greater than simply the number of arrests made.

Predatory forces will arise inside society and appear from without. They must be dealt with. Mastery of the arts of war, and the ability to use force skillfully when necessary, is needed. But they are ultimately not enough. For a martial artist or a law enforcement officer, for personal security or for the security of a community or nation, the use of force is necessary, but not sufficient, to make life harmonious, peaceful, prosperous or stable.

Bun represents the arts of language, philosophy and law: the means by which a civil society is organized and regulated. Mastery of Bun was also considered essential for personal cultivation and for social harmony.

It seems obvious that to have a harmonious group, we ought to communicate with each other. We need to share ideas about what is good for people to do and what is good to avoid. We need to be able to convey why cooperation for the common good is in everyone's interest, why those interests should be balanced with personal freedom and fulfillment, and then see how we can work together to rationalize these personal and social needs.

By using convincing ideas and creating strong boundaries – enforceable laws – within which people have freedom from harm and freedom to act, the greatest happiness will follow.

This is one implication of Bun/Bu. Overreliance on one or the other will lead to collapse. Balance the mastery of the two, and you can hope for a stable and happy society comprised of mature and fulfilled individuals.

That is not in itself a Buddhist idea. The two great early promulgators of Buddhism – Genghis Khan and King Ashoka – both observed their version of Bun/Bu. But the Buddhist version of the need for self-defense, personal and communal, goes deeper. It will not allow us the self-serving error of saying: first I will conquer everything, and then I will make everyone behave nicely.

We can know that it is an error to try to remake the world according to our own utopian vision or our own self-interest (as the great dictators of the last century attempted,) because it is both an article of faith of Buddhism, and demonstrably true by logic, that (1) doing harm brings harm and doing virtue brings happiness; and (2) that since our world is created by our own actions (virtuous or non-virtuous,), we can infer that the best way to happiness is through kindness, not force.

However, it won't work just because we decide to be nice. We can't remake our world by wish or fantasy. It must be done via action, consistent and diligent action. In the short term, because of the karma we have accumulated in the past, violent people may approach us. We can and should vigorously protect ourselves and the people who depend on us. We have to do that with the proper motivation.

In the long term, through good conduct of body, speech and mind, we can transform our lives and our world to such a degree that violent forces will no longer approach. But we cannot fake that, or simply hope all will be well. The transformation is possible, but it will be an arduous and long process.

So were the two great Buddhist emperors simply being skillful — consolidating their power and pacifying their empire through the use of benevolent philosophy? Or did each of them have a genuine religious conversion later in their career, honestly feeling repelled by violence, renouncing the use of force, and deeply wanting to bestow happiness upon all the people of their empire?

I cannot speak for them, but it is not too hard to see the implication for our own choices. The balance of Bun and Bu calls for the creation of clear boundaries of acceptable behavior for our own lives and for our communities, within which freedom is possible. For example, a legal boundary such as the First Amendment to the US Constitution, which prohibits the restraint of vigorous debate, but will not tolerate violence.

The way in which we do our utmost to value and protect our own precious lives and the lives of the people who depend on us is shaped by the wise balance between Bun and Bu. And it will inform how we behave when the immediate threat is over, as we cultivate the qualities that will assure our own inner peace and interpersonal harmony.

In Buddhism, the warrior ideal is never far from the religious ideal. To neglect the connection, or to confuse it, is perilous. To harmonize the two is the path to happiness.

The Duty of the Martial Artist

To a warrior, “duty” is essential. A warrior’s skill, power, and life itself have no meaning or purpose unless the sense of duty is clear, and we act in accord with it. For those serving in the military or in law enforcement, this principle can and should form the foundation of everything we do. That is as true now as it was in feudal Japan or any other militarized moment in human history, as far back as we can know.

Without a sense of duty above and beyond individual interests, we may become nothing but gangsters, living the fearful, vengeful, degraded life to which gangsters condemn themselves.

Civilian martial artists have choices to make.

Some will practice martial arts for the sake of vanity. They focus only on themselves — their body, their skills, their rank, their relation to others in their hierarchy.

Others practice martial arts like thugs. Getting power to dominate and intimidate others, as in the martial arts practice of the 9/11 bombers and other murderers.

It is possible to practice martial arts for the sake of improved fitness and health. To practice in search of some “deeper dimension” of experience in physical activity (even if that deeper dimension remains nebulous at first.) And to do so in the company of other people, sharing challenges and experiences, creating a community of fellow practitioners. But this still is an individual pursuit, in the sense that it is not one based on duty.

Having observed the practice path of thousands of people over the years, I can say that it is not one that will be sustained long enough, or intensely enough, to go very deep.

Fortunately, this is not the limit of the possibilities for the practice of civilian or “individual” martial arts.

Sincere practitioners should not allow themselves to be distracted by the rampant trivialization of martial arts — either the mocking portrayal in popular culture, or in its crude presentation in some martial arts schools.

The fact that the reputation of martial arts has been degraded by phony masters, ranks-for-sale, and pretentious dimwits who never took the time or trouble to develop themselves as practitioners before selling themselves as “great” or “important,” does not need to trouble us too much.

The dopes will always be with us. Don’t be one, and you’ll be okay. If others are getting undeserved recognition when you or your sincere friends and teachers are not getting as much, then I would recommend not troubling yourself too much about it.

It is better to be accomplished than to be well-known. It is better to be quiet and humble and practice deeply. That is why the sense of duty is so important — as important for individual practitioners of martial arts as it is for those in police or military service.

If you are practicing so that you can defend your precious life from harm: good. If you are motivated to make yourself strong and sharp so you can take care of the people who depend on you — family, friends, neighbors, innocent strangers everywhere — that motivation itself will be a great source of personal power and inspiration for your practice.

To be sincere and humble and strong and useful is only the foundation. We can take our martial arts practice much further.

But to do it, we must go step by step, leaping over nothing on the way to our goal, no matter how high our aspiration. The profound desire to save all beings from suffering is a very high motivation. But understand, we have to do what we must do to manifest that motivation. Just to say we have it, or want to have it, will not help much.

There is no point in using martial arts to ‘achieve enlightenment’ unless you know what that might mean.

You can’t help anyone learn and you can’t protect anyone from danger unless you can throw a punch.

Unless you can help your teacher, your fellow practitioners, your students, do what they need to do today, what good is a lofty ideal?

Start from where you are. Train. Teach. Learn. Work together with the people around you.

Sweep the floor. Pay the bills. Train consistently and sincerely. Fear nothing: not your opponent, not your limits, not old age, not death.

That is the beginning of your duty as an individual martial artist. That is the calling that, if you make it your own, will focus your practice and make it matter, for a lifetime and perhaps, beyond.

The Kingdom Within You

At the far wall of the karate dojo stands a makiwara – a wooden post bolted into the floor, used as a target to focus our strikes and to toughen our hands and feet as we practice.

Hit it.

If you have been practicing for a while, you will likely be transmitting tons of pressure into the target. Anyone can see — and hear — that you are affecting the world around you. But what is less recognized is that you are affecting the world within you as well.

If you have had beginner physics, you'll remember Newton's law of reciprocal motion:

“For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.”

It is more accurately stated:

“All forces occur in pairs, and these two forces are equal in magnitude and opposite in direction.”

So when the makiwara post bends back under the power of your punch, and the sound of the impact echoes through the room, any karate practitioner can tell you it's not only the things outside you that are influenced. You are changed as well. Power is communicated through your body at the same time. With every impact, your muscles absorb power, your connective tissues toughen, your hands are conditioned, your mind focuses, your hand-eye connection improves and the power of your will to project force also is affected.

For every action we take on the world around us, there is a corresponding effect on the world within us.

This differs from the Newtonian principle, in that the inner transformation is not always equal, and the effects are not limited to the physical. The implications of this fact are the single most important point to understand if we are to have a truly cultivated life.

What we do is who we are. If you want your life to be different than it is right now: do different things.

If you want to master the martial arts, go master the martial arts. Engage in the action of training many hours every day consistently and sincerely for decades without regard to the results and then, no problem: you will become the real thing.

Some people talk about training, speculate about it, read about it, and only do it an hour or two a week, and then not all of the weeks of the year. That can help them get in shape and learn some self defense skills, but that will never lead to mastery.

We are training in something all the time. What are these practitioners doing in all the other hours of the week? What is their mind doing? What is their body doing? If their mind is jumping from subject to subject, from TV, to computer, to radio, to road sign, to phone call, to advertisement, relentlessly, then that is the condition of mind they are cultivating. The fact that this chaotic flow is interrupted occasionally by martial arts is good, but the two hours of martial arts will not supplant the effects of the 166 hours that week spent in other ways.

If our mind is pulled by likes and dislikes, anger and desire, jealousy and fear, continually disturbed by the inputs that cascade into our senses from the modern world, then that is the mind we are cultivating. If we take an hour or two a day to train, calmly, powerfully and clearly, if we train our minds to think clearly the rest of the time and deliberately make effort to detect when it is turbulent and to return it to a condition of clarity – even in the midst of action — then that is the life we cultivate.

People are sometimes displeased with this perspective. They feel pressured by it. They respond to this by telling themselves they are doing the best they can. We all want to be stroked. We all like to be praised. We want our prejudices confirmed and our life habits affirmed. We are praised falsely often, by charming advertisers and persuasive salesmen, drug dealers and false teachers who say: Buy this... you're doing just fine...

If we want to get the life we want, we will have to do the work. The undeniable fact is we are cultivating something 24 hours a day. Our actions upon the outer world— what we do, what we say, what we think — have a transformative effect on our inner world, simultaneously. If we take our lives seriously we can take command of our schedule, use our body and mind well, and cultivate a life that is all we want it to be. Then we can be of use to others and hope to put an end to suffering for them and for ourselves as well.

If we float, rudderless, allowing the temptations and chaos of contemporary life to carry us along, we give up the direction of our own lives, invite disaster, and miss the chance we have to become true martial artists.

Mastery is not the exclusive right of a special few ancient masters or talented gold medalists. There is no limit on the amount of greatness that can fit into the world. Put yourself on that path and let nothing stand in your way. You will achieve it.

The Effects of Unison Movement

We are often encouraged to be unique. Children are told they are special. Marketers flatter consumers by selling them brands that will “define” them and differentiate them from the rest of the crowd.

Individuality is regarded as a high ideal in our society. In art or in science, standing out from the crowd is essential to success; innovation, doing something unusual, even if it is only re-appropriating the mundane, is the defining quality of success. In art, with the rejection of technique and aesthetics in the last century, novelty is a chief driver of creative work and career success.

This is a debilitating condition, both for the individuals who suffer from it, and for the society that encourages it.

There are more kids with fewer friends, less free play time, less physical experience and less exploration of the natural or urban world coming into martial arts than ever before.

These kids often grow up in environments where everyone in the home has their own TV and computer. Each person is “free” to choose to watch whatever they want, or play whatever game they want. Enslaved by relentless stimulation and easy gratification of impulse, in air-conditioned comfort, they have a hard time developing good relationships with others, or handling challenges. As a result, family contact declines, human relationships become fraught, and people become more and more culturally autistic.

This is disabling not just to these individuals, but to society, too.

Modern martial arts sometimes reinforces this. In martial arts where only free sparring is valued, or where personally invented, solo forms are the primary forms practice, real training, development and mastery are replaced by pandering to people’s assumptions, habits and self-centeredness.

That is why so many boxing gyms or modern combatives training centers are populated by performers with outsized egos, volatile emotions and raging ambition. Exactly the qualities you don’t want in the people around you, or in yourself.

No wonder modern people feel alienated from the rest of the world.

If you are part of a family, a team, a company, a community, a country or any other human institution, you will notice that you have a higher likelihood of functioning competently (and by the way of being happy and successful) if you can shift from the role of leader to peer to subordinate easily and appropriately, as circumstances demand.

You can step up to the plate, completely alone, and do what you need to do, skillfully and courageously. And you can immerse yourself in the work of the team, pull your weight, do

your part without hesitation, and without ego getting in the way.

In traditional martial arts, we spend a good part of our training time doing unison movement. All the participants doing the same sequence of the same moves, simultaneously.

Some people ignorantly view this as robotic. These people are slaves to the idea that freedom equals individuality. As if diversity was the only value. As if the world was a better place because everyone can pick a different flavor of Ben & Jerry's. As if being a part of a community reduced your worth.

While children are naturally self-centered, and teenagers are actively engaged in a process of psychological individuation, a healthy adult outgrows these stages. Remaining in them narrows the scope of life and deletes the opportunity to mature and participate in a vital community.

Unison movement during martial arts practice, whether in a town square in China, a park in Seoul, a castle in Japan or a monastery in Tibet, is an expression of freedom. The freedom to unite with others in common purpose.

The freedom to become, of your own volition, a member of a community of people who are sharing skill, experience, their precious human life with other people. They may never say a word to each other outside of training. But simply moving together during their martial arts practice to some degree bridges their differences, reduces the significance of the minor things which separate them, and unites them in a shared humanity. They have discovered, as human beings have for millennia, that true community is a source of happiness.

Contrary to the Olympic assumption that the world is composed of one great gold medalist, a bunch of losers, and a whole world sitting on their couches watching the chosen few, unison movement gives everyone an opportunity to be their best, make the most of their lives, and appreciate the worth and dignity of the people around them.

From a technical training aspect, it is easy to learn from the example of the more skillful people around us. With our mind relaxed, not stressed, not hyper aroused, not compulsively showing off, we can lose the rigidity that prevents free learning. Then, when we turn up the heat in training, or when we face the moment of truth, outside of the training situation, in a crisis, a confrontation or in single combat, we have the foundation of skill and of self reliance we have built over the years of training. We also have the ability to work with other people, to achieve what we need to achieve in other settings.

Individualism and tribalism are destructive when they are compulsions, or when they are taken to be absolute good. The playwright Samuel Becket said, "Hell is other people." A true modernist, he constructed a hell for himself.

We, as true martial artists, should make every effort to take those walls down and liberate all the suffering beings stuck inside.

Unison movement in kata or other group-training methods is an antidote to this post-modern disease.

Train hard. Together.

Come Together

It is impossible to have a strong practice without a group to practice with. When Sakiyama Roshi decided to completely dedicate his life to Zen meditation, he did not just retire into his room. He sought out the company of like-minded people. With them he entered an atmosphere in which practice was encouraged. A place where a practice schedule was maintained, neither subject to the whims of an individual nor forced upon anyone.

We need to share our lives. We need the encouragement and support of others. We need to see that our weaknesses are not ours alone, and that we can get stronger as we share our strengths. We need to be challenged and appreciated. And when our fervor for training lags, we can enjoy the simple spirit of fellowship and the example of people we admire.

Little by little, instead of a meandering path, our life develops a strong, regular pulse.

Very few people came to my dojo seeking “a life of practice.” They just wanted a few lessons, to learn some moves, to tone up, develop a nice six pack, to feel fearless, or to get focused.

Many people at first assumed they’d train for six weeks or a semester, like the other activities they had done, till they moved on to something new.

They thought of karate in many ways:

I am 26, I haven’t worked out since college and I want to get back in shape before it’s too late...

I did Nautilus, I ran, I did machines, and I thought this would be less boring...

I always wanted to do it. I am 17, so it’s now or never...

I always wanted to do it. I am 35, so it’s now or never...

I always wanted to do it. I am 50, so it’s now or never...

I know there is a spiritual aspect to it. Do you have that here?...

I want my kid to get into it...

I want to be more flexible...

I want to feel good...

My cousin does it, in California. He loves it...

I did another style in college, but they don’t have that around here...

I want to do some sport with my kids...

I saw a movie about it. It looked pretty cool...

I’m going through a divorce...

On the sign-up card that people filled out when they started, there was a box where they could put their reasons for joining and their goals. Most people wanted to get a good workout and have a good time doing it. Some mentioned getting self-defense skills. Sometimes people filled out their address and phone number and just stopped right there

and looked at the card and looked out the window, and couldn't tell you what they wanted.

Sometimes they didn't know. Sometimes their reasons were too emotional to admit to me, or even to themselves. Some felt intimidated at work or at school or in some family relationship, and they didn't want to take it anymore. They sure didn't want to write that on a card for a stranger to read. Some felt like they were getting old and wanted to halt the decline. Some had had a crisis, been attacked or embarrassed.

Regardless of how different their motives for joining were, what I asked of the jocks and the nerds, the men and the women, the adults and the children was in many ways the same: To put on their new white uniform. To stand this way. To walk that way. To bow like this. To not talk, just copy what they saw. And so on. It was simple, it was new, and it was the same for everyone, regardless of their frame of mind or experience.

We explained why to people who wanted to know why. We approached training this way because it allowed everyone to shed their personal habits and limits and act freely. They could set aside their status, high or low, their mood, their abilities, their schedule, everything. And, within their capacity, they could simply act.

Some people tried to bring the skills and status they had in their lives outside the dojo into the dojo, in order to feel more secure as a beginner. For them to let go of that status, maybe for the first time in a long time, especially to become an awkward beginner after years of feeling competent as an athlete, a parent or a professional, felt strange.

Some people found it a relief; some a thrill. Some people—students, for example—found it pretty much the same as what they did every day anyway.

Each of the people in our dojo was unique. Their abilities and skills and interests varied, but what karate practice asked of each of them, and what it gave them, was in many ways the same.

Human beings are always on the lookout for something. We may look poised and satisfied, with a happy, stable life. But until we have completed our path, in the broadest sense, we will be permeated with unease, with wanting. And the story will go on and on.

People entered the dojo. They brought their karma. We shared our lives. A college athlete who wanted a challenge she couldn't get in seasonal sports. An emergency room doctor who got grief all day from people he patched up. A high school teacher who was trying despite the odds. The father of three who needed relief from stress.

In training we added stress, incrementally, and got so much stronger as a result, that often the things we had to deal with outside the dojo seemed modest in comparison. Sometimes people felt pressure not from their work, but from what their work lacked. They were frustrated. Their jobs were not challenging or rewarding. They felt strapped in and

stepped on. They wanted to devote themselves to something worthy. They wanted a challenge. Why not stand tall despite it all? Some people felt good and wanted to feel even better.

Everyone had their own life. There were no 'regular' people. There was a special class for a group of teenagers who had been involved in violent crime. They were in foster care. Their lives were chaotic. But they liked to come to the dojo to learn and train with a group.

There were classes for children ages 5 to 10. Some parents brought their kids in to watch a children's class, and the kids didn't have the faintest interest. Some kids couldn't wait to start, and they talked about it all the time and practiced every night at home and couldn't wait to show their relatives every time they visited. Why is that?

All of the moms and dads and grandmothers and grandfathers, sitting on the benches at the side of the dojo, watching their children in class, had their own story. Each one of the little, unformed five year olds had his own story. Nervous or confident, friendly or sullen, not one of the teenagers in the teen class was a 'type'. If you talked to them, you found out that their story was not like anyone else's. Often I didn't hear their stories. Usually the members just joined in with the rest of the group. They were part of it. Disappeared into it. If they were confused or stressed at some point, we helped them. If they were struggling, we encouraged them. If they excelled, we praised them. But generally speaking, we all just trained. Dropped the story. Dropped the burden of our relentless, human agenda. And just practiced.

One woman shyly asked if we would take a deaf child. I said, sure. He went to a school for the deaf. He was getting picked on. She discouraged aggressive behavior, but she wanted him to be able to defend himself. She saw in an article in a magazine that karate could be good. Up until then she thought it was bad. A neighbor recommended our school. She came and watched. People showed respect to one another.

It is beautiful to watch, she thought. This is something missing from our lives. For a year, from the benches at the side of the room, she watched her son's classes. He loved it. Again and again, she said she pictured herself in the class. She joined. She had been a painter before her children were born. She did aerobics, went jogging. She had two children 12 years apart. Both unable to hear. Her life became taking care of them, taking them to therapy, loving, praying.

Now she was wearing a white gi, practicing every day and wondering if she could be doing this. "Me?" Her son asked, "Are you going to keep going until you are a master, Mom?" He said he would definitely keep going until he was a master.

At our dojo everyone who made an effort could succeed. Everyone who had been practicing for a while had an opportunity to teach newer people. Everyone who was new learned from people who were more experienced. Those more experienced people were of all ages, all walks of life; their race or religion known or unknown, became irrelevant.

All that mattered in that time and place was the aspiration to learn and the intention to teach. The social divisions disappeared, leaving no trace.

Does this mean we made no distinctions? Between young and old, male and female, we did make distinctions. Men and women have different body structures, so the physical conditioning varied. Children had a playful atmosphere in their classes with moments of seriousness. Adults were challenged physically and mentally in every class. Older members were not encouraged to do sparring or heavy body contact. People were free to choose their own level of intensity. They got advice and made their choices. There was no distinction made arbitrarily. Each person gave all they had and got what they needed.

The Golden Age of Martial Arts

Eruptions of violence appear in the news and in the world around us every day.

In civil war era Japan or during inter-dynastic periods in China, social disorder was the norm. As martial artists, we have heard stories from these times. They are part of martial arts lore. They have been romanticized in modern retelling. They have entertained us, but they have also inspired us and instructed us in the need for training in martial arts and in the nobility of the skillful use of force in the restraint of harm.

The days of civil unease are with us now. And the need for the personal cultivation of martial skill has not changed. The presence of firearms and other weapons and of a professional law enforcement contingent in society has not reduced the relevance of martial arts training.

The ways in which social conditions have changed since the origins of Asian martial arts, have not changed our need for training in ethics either: the ethics of our obligation to protect ourselves and others and of what constitutes right action in ordinary conduct and in the face of violent threat.

Modern people are well educated in violence. On the news, and through the menacing behavior of thugs in music, games, movies and on television. Even in higher realms of social discourse, a pose of bullying and intimidation is not only accepted, but admired. Mayhem as entertainment trains us in a set of values and behaviors. Under pressure or in ordinary life, people use what they are taught.

Six high school girls were trapped in a room with a violent criminal. He attacked one at a time. What if the other five had trained in martial arts? Twenty-nine college students found themselves within a few yards of a shooter. They all bolted for the door while some of their fellow students were shot.

What if they knew their own strength? What if they had been taught to unite and fight back in the face of murderous threat instead, of to run off individually? What if, upon first seeing the rifle, the ones nearby had stopped the threat before it became deadly? What if, instead of watching videos and eating junk food to make themselves feel tough and happy, kids could train in martial skills and have the clear mind, good self-image, strong body, and sense of purpose that it takes to avoid wasting your life in arrogance or cowardice?

Can martial arts have such a good effect? It can. Is this too much to ask of it? We can all do something. We can work hard, be strong and humble, and do right.

We can further the strength and the decency of at least a few members of our society, a society in danger of losing its virtue. A society that is not teaching young people what they need to know is exposing itself to harm.

Let's not forget why we became martial artists. Let's not forget what we admired or who we wanted to be. The mission of the true martial artist now is as critical as it was in Tokugawa era Japan or in the time of Bodhidharma and the Shaolin Temple in China.

We are writing history right now. Only if we cultivate our skills and dedicate our time on earth to bettering the people with whom we come in contact, will we realize our true potential. Then this will be the golden age of martial arts, and our training will become a tremendous source of power.

Crippled By Comfort

Mas Oyama had tough hands. He routinely demonstrated his grip by crushing stone. He would place his hand on an anvil and have his assistant hit his hand with a hammer. It was not a trick. His hands were tough. He hit the makiwara with his knuckles, and he slapped an oak pole with his palm and the back of his hands day after day, until they were tougher than oak. He developed a crushing grip through training. There are a few people around who can do this now. But very few.

Sometimes people will rationalize their weakness by saying that there is more to martial arts than power. And of course there is. I suspect Mas Oyama himself would have agreed. But a weak body is not an advantage. An unhealthy body is a disability. Yet we, like modern people all over the world, without giving it much thought, accept weakness.

In pre-modern times people often suffered from want — from famine and drought for example, and from inescapable danger — from floods or attacks from wild animals. As modern people, we are much more likely to be crippled by comfort.

Ancient people found ways to overcome the dangers they faced. As martial artists, it is up to us to skillfully find ways to overcome the serious threats to our lives and our health that we now face. While it may seem less heroic to do battle with air conditioning or cars than it is to battle marauders or wild animals, the threat to our lives is as grave and as urgent.

Many of the techniques in martial arts are simple to execute if your body is strong. They are daunting if you are weak. People do not realize this. In the days when many people spent their time in labor, strength was a given. Those who wanted to excel in martial arts found ways to increase their strength far above that of the other people who worked in the fields, on ships or in trades. As they practiced, even in so-called internal arts like tai chi, they developed power, and while the quality of the power changed from crude to subtle over the course of their career as martial artists, the health and vigor of their body was presumed.

We sit at desks and consider it normal. We ride in cars to and from our desks. After work we sit and watch TV, or read, or look at the computer. For a special change of pace, we go to a movie theatre and sit there, watching others do things. Or we go to a beach and sit there.

If that doesn't describe you, that is excellent. But it takes work and an unusual degree of insight to see that there is something unnatural and harmful in an inactive life. The statistic is that 66 per cent of modern people get no exercise. Another 20 per cent get "very little."

So it is not unusual, even for people who do train, to have low expectations about what it means to be fit, or what it means to work hard, or what real martial accomplishment

consists of.

The current generation of practitioners has no less talent than the generations of the great masters of the past. But now we face some obstacles that those old masters never could have.

As modern people, we accept the division of labor as normal. In pre-modern times, people had the skills they needed to keep themselves alive. When they were thirsty, they knew where to find water, and they brought some home to their family. People knew where to find food or how to grow it, how to hunt or fish or trap their food. They knew how to find or build shelter. The most important challenges of their lives were shared with other people.

If and when the time came that they had to defend themselves, people banded together to deal with the threat and then, when the battle was over and the threat repelled, they returned to their ordinary life.

Nowadays we have very limited skills, and we delegate almost everything. We do not have skills that integrate us into the natural world, or enable us to engage with people we know for mutual benefit.

It makes us isolated. And it makes us arrogant. We assume that systems will all hold up forever. Food will appear in the store. Water will flow. The heat will come on in the wintertime. The AC will come on when it's hot. The TV will work. The hospitals will be open. The police will take care of the mess, and then they will disappear.

How much can we afford to delegate? People don't sing much anymore. Singing is left to professionals who are good at it, who do it all the time. But singing is good for everyone, for normal people, for amateurs, and it is good for people to do together.

Athletics are done by the elite. After a few years of playing many young people are discouraged about pursuing life-long physical practice because they feel they lack the talent to make it to the majors or to earn a gold medal. So they don't do it. But being physical, being fit, having a healthy, strong, coordinated body, makes life good. Without it people feel bad. They become emotionally awkward and unstable. They suffer and are unhappy. But it is accepted as "normal" to be out of shape.

Because of the material abundance of our time and place, it is easy to become complacent until it is too late. Easy to go along heedlessly until our bodies are so atrophied that a trip on the sidewalk becomes a trip to the hospital. Until we appear to be an easy target to a mugger, and we find the mugger's judgment is true, and we find that we are helpless under the pressure of a confrontation.

How much can we afford to delegate?

This is what I would say to all sincere martial artists in the modern world, east or west: the world needs you. The world needs you strong and able. The world does not need any more thugs or show-offs. The world doesn't need any more weenies or whiners, victims or slackers.

The world needs people who are strong enough to take care of themselves and the people who depend on them, with enough energy left over to help even people they don't know. People with dignity and skill who teach effortlessly, just by their example, without any effort to influence anyone, yet whose effect is profound.

That is a worthy aspiration. I encourage you to take your martial arts practice seriously and to pursue it sincerely. Do not let conventional values or limited expectations stop you from fulfilling your dreams and your potential.

Don't stop until you can crush stone with your hands. Don't stop until you can lift the heaviest burdens from the shoulders of the people who need you.

Success in Martial Arts

We devote so much sweat and struggle and heart to our martial arts training. But how do we know if we are succeeding?

Non martial artists sometimes think that the measure of success is how many people you beat up. In martial arts movies, each challenge takes the form of a single combat to destruction or death. If this really were the way to measure success, then there would be only one excellent martial artist, with a lot of dead ones, and that winner would soon tire out and be replaced by another temporary victor.

In real life, dopes like that get straightened out quick – ganged up on in the schoolyard or hustled off to jail. It is in no way a measure of a successful martial arts practice.

Some feel that the best measure of success is tournament wins. Points scored and trophies won give them confidence that they are achieving skills. There are some very skillful tournament competitors. And there is no doubt that the pressure of an upcoming match gives lots of martial artists the incentive to train hard and go deeper than they otherwise would.

But if winning contests were a reliable measure of success, then the feeling of elation that comes from winning a match would not fade in seconds or hours after a victory, replaced by the need for another. And there is always the idea in the back of your mind, if you are competing, that many great fighters were never signed up for that match. That on the street, in a prison, in the military, somewhere out there, there are people whose fighting skills are extremely high, who are training furiously for encounters in which there are no rules and no time outs, whose propensity for violence is high, who you might face someday, but never in an organized tournament, at a level of conflict no cage could contain.

Not that the tournament-trained person would necessarily be at a disadvantage. Just that, as you head home with your trophy, you can't know.

Some martial artists measure their success by rank. Rank can be meaningful within a dojo or a style to indicate proficiency in a skill set or advancement in curriculum. And it organizes the relationships within the group – who leads, who follows, who is an authority, who works together. But between styles, ranks may vary in meaning. Within schools, the ranks may be awarded to people of widely differing skill levels. Some schools may keep solid, hard-working members at white belt or green belt for years; in others you will find 10 year olds with high degree black belts. You will find people who have been treading the same ground for thirty years, getting promoted higher and higher, acquiring Japanese titles and an aura of omniscience, whose skill is declining and egos are bloating.

If rank were a true measure of success, then ranks would be transferable between schools, and the people who held them would have no anxiety inside or outside their school about

their proficiency. High ranks would mean mastery, low ranks would mean humble aspiration, and everyone would respect everyone else. Ranks may mean something to the people involved in a given group, but rank, in itself, is not a reliable measure of success.

When I look out over a class I am leading, martial artists or law enforcement, recruits or operations specialists, the challenge of understanding how to measure success is always present. If I am not sure what they need to achieve, how can they know if their time is well spent? If there is no clear way to establish what is valued, what matters and what works, then how can I ever expect a high level of performance from the group?

But I do know what success is. It is not the same every moment for every person, but in the long run there is a set of guiding principles we can rely on and which we can use to measure our achievement:

Everyone trains sincerely – that means they are focused on what they are doing and trying hard;

Everyone becomes more skillful when they leave than they were when they entered;

Everyone's body is tested and pushed to a high level of performance;

Everyone's mind is stabilized and clear;

Everyone is introduced to a new idea, technique or insight;

Everyone reviews what they know how to do;

Everyone takes a deeper responsibility for their own training and for the people around them;

Everyone becomes aware that consistency is indispensable for high skill;

Everyone is reminded that the ultimate test is coming;

That the people we will face are training to the limit of their ability;

That there are no time outs in life;

No breaks; No shortcuts;

No one else to carry on the battle.

If they absorb this and act on it we have a successful training.

Do it for a lifetime and you are a successful martial artist.

The Dragons Roar

We can hear the dragons roar as the wind passes through the branches of the trees. We can hear them if we are still. If we have dropped off our body and mind and listen wholeheartedly — not half way, not distracted, not dutifully trying to hear a dragon roar, but openly, with our work complete and our mind present, stable and clear in all directions. If we try to select a piece of the sound, we will have nothing. How can we select a piece and separate it from its reality? But we will always be tempted to do it if we have not put our concerns down and let our disturbances subside.

If we separate ourselves from the natural world and live in a mediated and constructed world, (city and highway, office and apartment, car and computer and phone) we receive fragments of experience extracted from the context from which they actually arose. We believe we are able to interpret this flow of images and language and understand it accurately. The condition of our mind and its mechanized environment will not permit it.

We are misled. We mislead ourselves. The dragons roar becomes inaudible.

From the safety of their homes, to feel tough, people seek violent images. From the solitude of their homes, to feel connected, people seek sexual images. This is taken for granted as natural and good. It is neither. It is a source of suffering.

The insidious decontextualization of the images of war, which misleads armchair combatants and pacifists, is identical to the insidious effect of the decontextualization of pornographic images as absorbed by armchair studs.

When a young man is placed in a situation of physical jeopardy, he will change to adapt to it and to accommodate it.

In the schoolyard or on the street, he will become attuned to danger, and he will become stronger and tougher and faster to meet the challenge. Competitive sports mimic this challenge and mimic the result. In a healthy environment, he will win the respect of the other people in the neighborhood, not by killing all opponents, but by resolving to meet the challenge with courage and accept the difficulty without shrinking.

In warfare, in taking on the responsibility of common defense, whether as a volunteer or draftee, a young man will also rise to the challenge. Whether to meet the ideal of defending his country or defending other people's lives, or to meet the practical challenge of keeping himself and his friends alive under threat, he will be presented with the opportunity to become stronger, more skillful, more courageous, and more vigilant.

This ideal is not always met, on the battlefield, on the ball field or in our neighborhoods, but the possibility is there. And the ideal is often met. The ideal will never be met by people observing images of these scenes from the safe remove of a living room, classroom or boardroom. When these images are decontextualized, and especially when they are

removed from the time and place where they occurred, the images will not place any demand on the viewer, or give them any chance to change. They do not acknowledge the will or life of the viewer, but demand that the viewer passively accept the image as it passes.

These images do provide a feeling in the mind of the viewer, but that feeling is based in the viewer's limited experience. It is a projection of the viewer's experience, not refreshed by the reality from which the image was extracted.

If life decisions, cultural judgments or public policy are based on this misunderstanding, the resulting action will diverge from reality. Negative consequences will be inevitable. Pretenders to toughness will live a fantasy life, and make fantasy decisions, based on this error.

When a strong person, with battlefield or street experience, looks at an image of violence, it is possible for him to understand it in a way that no armchair observer or moviegoer ever can. When a person who was present at an incident observes the image taken there, he can understand it with even more precision.

Yet most of us are subject to a torrent of impressions that have been elided from their context. Most TV viewers do not know Afghanistan or Oprah, and most seem to think they do.

When a handsome, accomplished, high status male looks at an image of a sexy female, he can respond to that image in an informed way. Real women, with the degree of attractiveness and personal power depicted in the image, have often looked at him this way in real life, and may have responded to him in real life the way they are responding in the pornographic depiction.

There are very few such people in the audience.

Most viewers have less physical attractiveness and lower status than would be necessary to attract the enduring positive attention of the series of women they see depicted in this imagery. They can imagine how the interaction might go based on what they see depicted, but their reality does not go like that. By turning to representation of sexual activity for pleasure they, among other things, delete the motivation they might otherwise have to go to the gym, work hard, increase their status, be faithful – inwardly and outwardly – to their families, and to turn their attention to an arena of action which can provide them not only with lasting emotional satisfaction, but with sexual satisfaction as well.

They become attached to the depiction of sexual activity and, like drug addicts, they turn away from other kinds of human contact, and seek more pleasure.

Decontextualized images of violence and decontextualized images of sex are false and harmful.

We can avoid the disorientation that comes from relentless exposure to reproduced music, reproduced images, reproduced human action; the confusion that comes from immersion in reality made of encoding, recording, photography and architecture.

As a result we can regain the opportunity to connect face to face with the reality of our own lives.

To practice honestly.

To live vigorously and deeply.

To hear the dragons roar with our own ears.

Boys To Men

The varieties of human experience are many, but one thing all societies had in common until modern times was a way for boys to be initiated into adulthood. Nowadays this initiation is talked about in a quaint way, as if it were a ritual, as if you could go into a hot tent with a cool professor and drum, as if it was a mere formality to be gotten through on a special day. It was not.

Young boys looked up to the men around them and wanted to be like them. They recognized the inner qualities of confidence and freedom, and the outer qualities of skill and strength. They could also sense the purpose and responsibility that these men had. The boys sensed that they could not have those qualities just by wanting to have them. They needed to develop them. That could only happen through the training and guidance of the men, and through testing under pressure.

The test would measure character and skill by placing the boy, when he was ready, in a situation that would make high demands on him, and would reveal if his determination to join the adult world – to be a man – was sufficient to get him to complete the test without giving up or collapsing.

It was understood that if he did not pass, he would not be a man.

This was a good thing. It set the standards high so the boys would grow strong and prove it. High enough so that everyone would know they could meet a difficult challenge. That they could be depended upon by the community they were entering to willingly face danger and prevail, if the community were threatened.

The boys had a chance to show that they had worked hard and were prepared; that they were willing to risk their lives to meet the demands that life placed on them.

There was no way a pre modern people could survive without developing those qualities in men. It was implicit in the training and the testing, and evident in the actions of the boys who undertook it, that it was a challenge they wanted, so that they could prove themselves worthy to enter the community of men.

This initiation was not designed to separate them from the people they lived with. It was not done to make them different from the members of their community, or to gain entry into an elite. It was done to integrate them into the community. It was done to validate their manhood.

It validated the community as well. It was a way of saying to the group, I admire you. I am now worthy of membership. I am dependable. I am strong. I am someone who will give everything I have, make myself resolute and strong as I have been trained to do, and dedicate myself to serving the well-being and safety of all of you.

To work – to serve the individual and the community – the initiation must be willingly undertaken, and it must provide a genuine test that pushes the limits of the young man taking it, presenting him with real danger and the risk of failure. It must be a test of the effect of long and difficult training. That training must require the boy to change in order to meet the demands of a form required by the trainers. That form must be well designed to foster the best qualities of the young man. The motivation of the boy taking the test has to be the goal of gaining admission into the community, motivated by a desire to serve the people around him, accompanied by a willingness to face danger and to risk his life — to become a person that other people can depend on. That is how a genuine initiation into manhood works.

It was universal in pre modern times. It is rare now. And we see the results in weakness, decadence and confusion all around us.

Most work settings discourage initiation into adulthood. Marx and Engels tried their best to valorize industrial labor, but significantly, neither had done any. A service job or a factory job require little skill and provide little satisfaction, degrade people, and make them unhappy. They make few demands and provide no inner reward or outer accomplishment. Traditional artisan training offered many opportunities for true initiation and it still can. But most modern work does not offer this.

The process of initiation is emulated in sports and in professional training. But it usually falls short in both arenas.

In professional training, in engineering, law, academics, or medicine, there is a demand made on the individuals who participate which asks them to conform to the requirements set by a group of leaders. But these trainees are entering an elite fraternity. They are not dedicated to the general well being of the community. (There may be some participants who have an interest in that but through selection and training, the rule is that ambition trumps kindness.)

The cultural trappings of entry into these worlds and the incentive systems in place which restrict entry and reward entry are all designed to separate the initiated from the rest of society.

This corresponds to the formation of a priesthood in pre modern society. Where priesthood was conferred by merit on those who had come through the initiation process and had as its foundation selfless dedication to the well being of the community, it could work. When it was run as a separate track from the process of initiation, it was doomed to promote self-serving manipulation and trouble. It still does.

The difficulties people face in these professional settings make good and powerful demands on them and develop many good people. But they were never designed to turn boys into men, and they do not.

Contemporary professional training does not make physical demands, develop high physical skill or deep mental focus, or place young men in physical jeopardy. As a result – in the lab, in the courtroom, in the consulting room, at home, with their friends, on the ski slopes or tennis courts – no matter how high their status, how great their wealth or how significant their achievements, these professionals have less confidence in their manhood than they want to have.

Athletics emulates initiation. It is necessary for boys. Like training the mind in the professions or trades, it is a great thing. But like them, it cannot offer a complete initiation into adulthood for most young men.

Martial arts can be used to begin the process, and it has been, since the beginning of time. It can still go pretty far along the path. The reason the Marines have incorporated martial arts in the training for every Marine is not because there is a great demand for hand to hand combat on the modern battlefield. It is because it creates an intelligent body and a strong mind. Martial arts training can push the body to its limit, and put people consistently under high stress.

Properly done, martial arts develops the will. It enables practitioners to confront interpersonal human aggression directly, accustoms them to taking the initiative when confronted, to not being intimidated, and to meeting the challenge presented by a committed aggressor with the determination to prevail.

There are opportunities for civilian martial arts training that are like this. But they are hard to come by. It is rare to find a martial arts dojo which will push its members to the limit in training, consistently, over the long haul. It is rare — but not unheard of — to find a martial arts dojo which will make demands on the members that will be deeply transformative. It is very unusual to find one in which the leaders care about their trainees selflessly enough to push them hard with both devotion to their maturity and the skill to achieve it.

That is because in most martial arts dojos, even ones which are run by sincere and capable instructors, with serious, devoted students, our social norms of comfort and our expectation of praise for limited achievement compromise the training environment, so that if you push too hard or demand too much, people cry, quit, sue, or go somewhere where it is easier to get a rank.

Martial arts have a close connection to the few subcultures within our post-modern culture which retain the process of male initiation.

The military is one of them. Law enforcement is another. These are treated as marginal subcultures in the modern world, and in many places as suspect ones. But they preserve an ethos of mental and physical training, of service and personal responsibility which were until recently accepted by all people of good will as self-evident virtues and social necessities.

These ideals are indispensable and good for young men. This is an unusual idea now, so I want to answer one objection in advance: military and police training do not turn boys into mindless killers. Drugs and gangs and television and welfare and envy do.

Many boys are raised without men in their lives. The older people they know may never have been initiated into adulthood. They are raised by pop media. They come of age by partying, i.e., using illegal drugs and having sex. Their anti-social and anti-authoritarian posture is a reflex. Their minds are disturbed by desire and anger. They feel weak. They are not capable of working or learning. They do not know what to do.

If children are not initiated into adulthood, they will stay children. They will make demands on others. They will not have the ability or the inclination to take care of others. They will indulge themselves when they can. They will ask other people, individually or in the guise of the state, to take on the role of adults and provide for their needs and their happiness. However, as lifelong children, they will not feel that their needs have been fulfilled, and they will remain unhappy. This is how our culture has been crippled by comfort.

Girls in pre modern cultures also willingly took on danger and sacrificed their safety and comfort for the sake of the community. Their initiation into womanhood was through childbirth, and they entered the world of adult responsibility, just as warriors did, as life was placed in their hands.

The world around us has arisen as it has for reasons we may never fully know. But we do not have to leave it as it is. We can do our part by taking our responsibility seriously. By cultivating our lives — by being decent, by developing sharp awareness and clearly seeing how the lives of the people around us are unfolding. By creating the conditions in which we task ourselves with meeting the demands of a mature and fulfilled life, and by placing healthy, positive demands on the people we care for.

We all have the freedom and the power to do that. Freedom and power will come only from that.

The Crimson Tide

Bear Bryant was the most winning coach in college football history. He was good. He knew what was up. I am not sure he had much of a following among American Buddhists at the time. There might have been some serene, flexible, shaved headed folks in the stands at the 'Bama games in the 70's and 80's leaping to their feet in exultation every time the Crimson Tide gained a few yards. I never saw them. But it would have been as handy for them to have heeded Coach Bryant's urgent advice about training.

He told his players this:

"The will to win is nothing. Everyone has it. It's the will to prepare to win that matters."

He was talking to extremely motivated high performers about the competition they would face at the top rank of collegiate athletics. Naturally, they would face people who had the will to win. That is how those people got to face them to begin with.

What Coach Bryant instilled in his players was the present-time awareness of the impending challenge. And the fact that in the immediate presence of that challenge, it would be too late to prepare. He made sure his players knew there would be no way to suddenly rise to the demand of that critical moment and somehow magically surpass anything you had ever done before.

It may be that a young mom will suddenly find it in her power to lift a car off her newborn baby. But you don't see a lot of that. You don't see the moms saying, no problem, if the baby is playing in the street, I will just go ahead and lift a car or other vehicle off the little fella in the event that one should roll on him.

And I would not count on pulling that off yourself. In competition. On the field of battle. On the street. Or in our own inevitable meeting with death. We cannot expect to rise to the overwhelming demands of that moment without the will to prepare to face it, and to prevail.

We need to have that will now, and act upon it every day.

There are forces arrayed around us now that would take away our freedom and our lives. Materialists, filled with envy at those who seem to get their money for nothing and their chicks for free. Willing to do anything from enslaving people to poisoning the world to step up a notch and get more. The ambitious, who rage and conspire against those who seem lightly poised on the rungs of status above them. The lonely, seeking community with a group of imaginary ideal strangers, but disappointed, finding people close at hand inadequate. Sybarites, tearing down the walls of devotion and destroying the lives of children. Terrorists, delighting in the prospect of a crimson tide of their own making, delighting as they imagine it engulfing the cities of their enemies.

They all excuse themselves or justify themselves or make themselves heroes by saying that this is the way of the world. That this is a provisional state of unhappiness for some that will lead, long term, to happiness for me and mine. That the strong will survive. That it's you or me. Good or evil. And I will be the one to decide.

We are facing those folks.

But by far the most serious threats we face are from our own heart and mind. These are more dangerous than a world of tyrannies and poisons.

We cannot eradicate them. But we can face them with courage and skill, and we can prevail.

We cannot do it by passivity, by saying, I will do nothing, or by hoping for the best. We cannot do it by engaging in the same mental poisons – envy, anger, desire – that are driving the destroyers. We can only do it by a kindness and strength which remain at the service of other beings and which are so powerful and skillful that they are not infected by agitation, madness, selfishness or the desire for revenge.

We can only accomplish that by consistent training in ethical conduct, clear mind, and deep understanding of what causes the trouble around us and within us and how we can combat it decisively.

Hope will not bring us to the threshold of enlightenment. We cannot wait until the moment of death to prepare for it. We cannot wait until the moment of temptation, despair or distraction, and just figure it out somehow. Those moments will come. We will face enormous challenges. Unbearable delights and difficulties are in store.

For real. For you and for me. We are in this together. We need to prepare.

The will to triumph over these challenges means nothing. The will to prepare to win means everything.

One of the names of the Buddha is The Victor. He prepared to win for infinite eons and for the first part of his adult life. He was not mellow or easy-going or just good with everything.

He had battles to win and enemies to destroy. They are the same ones we are facing, right now.

Bodhisattva Action and Martial Arts

Martial arts and Buddhism, especially Zen Buddhism, have a long relationship, but the nature of that relationship — its limitations and potential — is misunderstood. A fully developed Buddhist martial art does not exist and likely never has. But the potential for a genuine Buddhist martial art does exist now.

It is the intentional application of the principles of Bodhisattva action that has been missing from martial arts practice. There is good reason that these principles have generally not been a part of traditional Asian martial arts, given the cultural setting in which the Asian martial arts arose. But because of the way our modern culture has developed, this can change. To have a vigorous, relevant martial arts practice, it is necessary for us to make this happen.

I was interested in Buddhism when I was very young, and I was interested in martial arts, too. I trained with a dozen martial arts groups over the years. Trained with some great athletes and lots of sincere people. I saw people meditating in some of these settings. But other than 'calming your mind,' I never saw much connection between spiritual aspiration and martial skill.

After some exploring, I found the karate of Shoshin Nagamine. He was the founder of a branch of Shorin Ryu, a traditional Okinawan style. I trained in his style for a few years, and then I went to see him.

As Okinawa's Chief of Police during the chaotic years after World War II, he was one of the pioneers of the public practice of karate, making it available to anyone who wanted to improve his life.

In the years after he retired from police service, he became well known as a karate teacher. Before his death in 1997 at 90 years old he was named a Japanese national treasure.

When I first met him, he was still teaching. In the alcove at the front of his dojo in Okinawa hangs a scroll with the words Ken Zen Ichi Nyo – Karate and Zen as One.

His approach to Zen practice was strong, but it had the same emphasis that you encounter everywhere that Japanese martial arts and Zen meditation are mingled.

In Buddhism the ultimate example of the perfection of being is a Buddha. That is, a being who is entirely free from suffering and entirely engaged in showing the path to Buddhahood to other beings.

A Bodhisattva is a being who is on the path to Buddhahood. That path consists of saving beings from suffering and protecting them from harm.

In order to have the skill, wisdom and the energy to accomplish their mission, Bodhisattvas engage in Bodhisattva action, called the six perfections of wisdom.

The six perfections include the perfection of generosity, the perfection of moral and ethical conduct, the perfection of not getting angry, the perfection of joyful effort in doing good, the perfection of meditation, and the perfection of wisdom. They are “perfections” instead of ordinary actions, because they are done with insight into the nature of reality, and not with selfish or ignorant motives.

To complete their mission to get out of suffering themselves and to save all beings, Bodhisattvas accumulate merit and wisdom through their actions. Without one or the other of these, their efforts will be incomplete.

The accumulation of merit refers to what we do to take care of others. The accumulation of wisdom refers to our insight, achieved through deep meditative concentration, into the nature of reality – the way things actually work. It is this understanding that frees us from suffering ourselves, and enables us to be effective in helping others. The emphasis of Buddhist practice in martial arts has been exclusively on the wisdom side. The assumption is that the merit side, motivation by compassion, will somehow take care of itself. It doesn't.

Zen practice in martial arts emphasizes the development of Samadhi – the ability to place one's mind on an object of attention and leave it there, with clarity and stability, for as long as you want. It is essential in advanced practice of martial arts. But traditionally, Bodhisattva action, the compassion side of the equation, has not been a part of the curriculum.

Understand this: Bodhisattva action is not something external to martial arts that I would like to see added. It is something very much at the heart of martial arts that has been neglected. It is what distinguishes a warrior from a gangster.

You can see the compassionate action of a warrior in what the firefighters and police officers did in New York on September 11, 2001. They ran into the burning buildings to save people. They were not forced to go. They ran in. Ask police officers and firefighters why they did it that day, and they will tell you it's the same reason they do it every time, as a matter of course throughout their careers. They will say, It's what we do. It is what they get paid for.

They know that it is an honor to take care of people who need help. It is what makes life matter, makes life worth living. It elevates the condition of their lives, makes them honorable in their own eyes; it is an honor they share. It is extraordinary. Yet it is the attitude you find in public servants all over the country.

The reason you find it so often is not because every police officer or firefighter lives up to the ideal every moment, but because at least in these professions, service and courage are

still considered virtues. These values are not added on top of their training. They are built in.

This is a kind of Bodhisattva action. This sense of purpose and valor is what needs to be restored to modern martial arts.

Let me give you another example, with important implications for Zen training in a martial arts context. It is a modern take on a kind of pre-modern martial Bodhisattva. I am using the word Bodhisattva not in the strictly technical Buddhist sense, but to describe someone whose life is dedicated to serving and saving beings.

In the classic film “The Seven Samurai,” directed by Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa, there is a single scene, at the heart of the film, where Kurosawa shows us his understanding of heroism, service and the warrior ideal.

You can see in the story that both dimensions – merit and wisdom – are highly developed in the leader of this small group of warriors.

As the scene begins, we see that some poor farmers from a little village are being harassed, robbed, and humiliated by a raiding gang. The villagers will be killed if they can’t come up with some kind of payoff for the gang. The villagers feel the only way out of this extortion is to hire some samurai – professional soldiers – to defend them.

It’s a time of civil unrest in Japan, the 16th century, a big battle has just ended, and there are many unemployed samurai available for hire. But every time the poor villagers try to hire a samurai, they have to admit that all they have to pay is a small bag of rice. The samurai they are trying to hire are offended by this tiny offer and tell them to get lost.

Finally they meet one man who listens carefully to their story. He was once employed by a rich lord, but now in light of the hard times, he is willing to work for peanuts. His bearing is strong and dignified. He understands that a samurai’s job is to protect and serve his employer. If his employer happens to be a bunch of poor nobodies, well, that’s life. He accepts their offer.

His first task is to recruit a handful of samurai to help in the mission. He devises a test of their character and their skill.

He takes a seat on the floor in the center of a room, facing the door. He is visible through the open doorway from the busy street outside where many unemployed samurai are walking by.

He stations his young assistant just inside the threshold of the room, invisible to anyone approaching the door from the street. The young assistant holds a wooden sword, a bokken, above his head ready to strike down on the head of whoever enters.

The older samurai sitting there in the center of the room gestures to a strong young guy who happens to come walking by. The guy comes over, and as he enters, the young assistant brings the bokken crashing down on the entering samurai's head.

Only a parry at the last second kept this young samurai's head from splitting open. Furious at the trick, the young samurai curses these two and heads off.

The older samurai remains seated, still visible from the street.

Another, better dressed samurai comes walking down the street. As before, the older samurai gestures to this fellow to come in. The fellow approaches. As he crosses the threshold, the bokken comes slashing down toward him, but before it can hit him, he deftly parries and steps back, muttering, angry that he has to deal with this kind of affront. The older samurai waves him away.

A minute later, a third samurai comes walking down the street. His bearing, strong and dignified, shows he is well trained.

The older samurai catches his eye and gestures to him to come into the room. The young assistant with the bokken is again standing hidden behind the threshold, ready to strike.

The third samurai approaches the doorway, but before he enters, he stops, sensing the presence of someone just inside. He looks at the older samurai, and a little smile crosses his face, as if to say hey, what's with the guy hidden behind the door?

Seeing this reaction, the older samurai seated there gets up, delighted, bows to this third samurai, calls the young assistant away from the door, and invites the third samurai in. He has found his first qualified recruit.

The older samurai feels compassion for the poor villagers and knows his path is one of service, not status or reward. He is a skillful leader who knows what to look for in his warriors, and who knows that the selection of your team is half the battle.

The three samurai that he tested represent three levels of accomplishment in martial skill.

The first man, the one who parries at the last second, is a good technician and can react quickly. The second can sense the intention of the attack before it is physically executed and can pre-empt the strike with one of his own. The third, in a state of awareness beyond thought, *hishiryō*, can grasp the whole situation, not just perceiving it from a limited subjective point of view, but globally.

Because of this, he can sense the hidden potential in the moment. He is not caught in conflict initiated by the opponent, but foils it without opposition and without having to act consciously. That is very advanced martial arts attainment. It represents what is

nearly the ultimate use of Samadhi in martial arts.

This Samadhi may be attained as a result of participating in Zen Buddhist practice. But while it makes use of techniques that have been developed in Buddhism, these techniques may not be used to attain the Buddhist objectives of saving beings from suffering and the direct perception of the nature of reality.

In the story, this may be exactly how they are using the techniques. In modern martial arts, where purpose has been separated from training, this ethos needs to be recovered.

Mahayana Buddhism — the northern Asian Buddhist traditions of Tibet, China and Japan that use the ideal of the Bodhisattva to define their objectives and their methods of achieving them — requires three elements to be present in the mind stream of a practitioner in order to be consistent with Buddhist goals.

First, practitioners must have renunciation. That is, they must understand what kinds of action will be helpful and which kinds will be harmful, and then act on that understanding.

Second, they must attain bodhicitta — the wholehearted wish to save all beings.

And third, they must aim to have correct view: undistorted insight into the nature of reality itself.

These aspirations may be present in seed form in the motivations of people who are practicing martial arts, but they do not have a chance to grow, because the support for them is missing from their training.

To understand why the ideal of Bodhisattva action has been neglected in martial arts training, we can look at the early history of the modern Asian martial arts, in the early 19th century in China.

Business was booming. As goods were accumulated and stored, they needed to be guarded. That is where the growth of public martial arts began. Before then, martial arts were closely held traditions, secret knowledge preserved by feudal families.

There were some dedicated and gifted individuals sponsored by leading families, or living in monasteries or hermitages, who applied Taoist exercises to martial practices. For example, they used physical exercises and imagery to direct the flow of energy through the body, or used herbs and other substances to transform the body's natural potential.

They undertook these practices to become invincible, to break through stone walls, to uproot trees, to become invulnerable to blades and bullets; some made super human efforts to harmonize their body and mind and pierce the veil of the phenomenal world; some trained for the sake of victory in an impending battle, some for longevity and

health, or for all these reasons. Some virtuosi achieved their goals and taught the secrets they learned.

The exceptional practices of these few adepts were the ones recorded in stories we hear about great Asian martial artists, but these people were rare.

Most martial artists in those days were young men moving from the countryside into the cities and seaports. They wanted to learn a few things that would help keep them alive while they were guarding a caravan on the road or a warehouse in a port filled with strangers who were more than likely tough, drunk, and armed.

These young men went to established martial arts teachers for training. Sometimes teachers were hired by companies or rich families to train their guards. Sometimes the young men, through family connections, were sent to study at the home of a teacher who taught privately, in the old style.

Often they picked up a little here and a little there, practiced together and traded techniques, and after a while a talented fighter and leader would develop an approach and a following of his own.

Not all the martial artists in 19th Century China were highly cultivated or well trained, or even interested in becoming those things. It is true that some degree of Samadhi is not only an advantage in martial arts, it is a necessity. If a punch comes toward your nose and you are distracted by how you feel about the punch, you are in trouble.

If you are easily distracted by outer stimulation, or inner events like fear, hope, hatred, or planned technical responses, you are in trouble. If your mind seeps outside the present moment — if you anticipate the results of your next move, if you dwell on a solid punch you just landed, or an opportunity you missed, even for a fraction of a second — you get smashed. Samadhi is developed in training, with or without meditation, with or without calling it Samadhi.

This capacity for sustained focused attention is important in martial arts, just as it is in playing music or chess, flying a plane or any other demanding activity. It is associated with Buddhist training, especially because it is emphasized in Zen Buddhism, which was for centuries the official religion of the military government of Japan, but it is not necessarily a spiritual achievement.

Our style of karate, the style I learned through Shoshin Nagamine, is called Shorin Ryu. The name is intended to draw a connection to one of the three main streams of Chinese martial arts, and trace its roots to the Shaolin Temple in Honan province.

The Shaolin Temple is associated with the Indian Buddhist master Bodhidharma. He is not only the legendary founder of our stream of martial arts, he is the first patriarch of Chinese Zen. It may be that the exalted image of this great teacher was appropriated by

martial artists to lend depth and credibility to what they were doing. But maybe there is more.

We do know that the northern Shaolin White Crane style of kung fu, the ancestor of Nagamine's Shorin Ryu, was practiced in Fuchow, the Chinese port frequented by Okinawan ships making the trip to the mainland. That is where many of the Okinawans learned their martial arts.

During the growth of Chinese commerce and the opening up of public training in martial arts, from the 1790's to the Japanese conquest of Okinawa in the 1870's, empty hand martial skill still was a requisite for all commercial sailors including the Okinawans, so the connection to Shaolin was cultural; whether there was a spiritual significance for those people is not written down.

In a truly Buddhist practice of the martial arts, we do have a part of departure from our cultural disaster: a disaster in which our technological power is deployed in the service of desire and anger, threatening everyone. It makes decent people feel vulnerable. To thugs. To riots. To aimlessness, loneliness and hurry. To sickness, old age, and death.

To create a Buddhist martial art, we will have to import parts of the Buddha's teaching which have not been emphasized in martial arts, but are present there in seed form. This new approach will make martial arts stronger, not weaker, and more practical and purposeful, not just a hobby or a cover for uninitiated wannabes.

A number of the members of our karate dojo and Zen meditation group took the Buddhist vows of moral and ethical conduct, and practice these vows daily. Partly they vow to observe to the ten prohibitions: not killing, not stealing, not lying, not engaging in sexual misconduct, not using intoxicants, not gossiping, not using harsh and divisive speech, not being greedy, not being angry, and not having wrong views.

These prohibitions have a particular function. They are restraints on the ignorant behaviors which cause us to suffer. If we take these vows seriously – not just take them – they provide a kind of spiritual kata or ideal form to which we can continually aspire, and which will guide us toward a life that is decent and strong.

Following these ten prohibitions allows disturbance to subside. It gives us the peace we need to cultivate genuine Samadhi – not just the practical application of focus to our worldly tasks but a deeper meditative state, with senses withdrawn from contact with the outer world, and our mind settled way down. This gives us access to the wisdom aspect of the Mahayana path.

The other half of the Mahayana path, the side of Bodhisattva action, is also necessary for us to attain the complete fulfillment of the Bodhisattva ideal.

It is addressed in the other six of the sixteen vows that Zen practitioners take:

To take refuge in the Buddha, the Buddha's teaching and in the community of fellow practitioners. That is, to renounce dependence upon things that will not support us, and to turn to where we can get what we really need.

To do good, to avoid evil and to do good for the sake of all beings. This is the Mahayana vow of Bodhisattva action.

Putting people under pressure skillfully so they develop is what a teacher does. That demand, though not always pleasant, is kind. Teaching them that no matter how skillful we become we can only fulfill our humanity through service to others, is essential.

To make a truly Buddhist martial art – powerful, disciplined and focused on saving beings from harm – is the way ahead.

The Face of the Earth

All babies will reach a hand across the gulf of empty space that separates them from their mother's cheek and will touch it and smile. And Momma will smile back, in quiet delight at the simple mystery of love in this world. You don't need to explain it or unravel it. You can live it.

And spend the rest of your life with a glimmering memory of the simple love-without-question that is a hint of bodhicitta.

Given the right conditions, it will grow. It is what makes men and women marry for life. It's what makes brothers pull their brothers out of the field of fire or carry strangers from a house in flames.

It's the feeling that makes you set your feet on the long road to Buddhahood and willingly walk forever or for as long as it takes. You will have no doubt. It is all there is to do that's worth doing. And all the distractions of this world don't get a moment of your heart; the temptations are nothing.

You will know where your life leads and you can read your own Buddhahood written in the stars. You can hear it in the sound of the trees when the wind blows. In the grim procession of cruelty, madness, rage, and greed that sweeps nations into oblivion and crushes the bones of the petty and powerful into dust; the dust we walk on, that the skies rain on, that the grass grows on, and which, in our time, will rise again as the mountains that will take us on our path to the stars.

We come into this world with the karma we have created in infinite past lifetimes. We can never escape what we have done, but we are entirely free to act now.

It may be that a butterfly has no idea how beautiful it is. It may feel no sadness at all that its lifetime is just a few weeks. But you should know how beautiful you are. And never forget how fleeting this chance is to do what is noble and good in this world.

Who Are The Good Guys

Two a.m. on Saturday night is a funny time in this world. What was gonna happen is probably over, and if it didn't happen, you have to deal with it and go home.

But there are always some who want to take it into overtime.

The streets were wet and the mist was blowing in clouds. I was sitting with my lights blacked out on the side of the road when a call came for a complaint of a car blocking a road a mile from where I was. I drove over. The mist was thick and the streets were dark, but as I rolled down the block, I saw the body of a car turned sideways straddling the yellow line in the middle of the road. The windows were smashed in. Glass filled the car. The headlights were smashed too, but one of the tail lights glowed like an ember, like the battery had been left on when the car was ditched, like the car had been sitting there for hours before someone reported it.

No blood. No bodies. No windshield smashed from the inside out by a head moving at high speed. No collision damage. But there was a plastic leg in the back seat. I doubted the owner hopped away. I called dispatch and ran the plate and got the phone number of the owner. I called the owner. Sorry to wake you, ma'am. Do you own a — I described the car... She said she did. I asked, where is it now? She said in the driveway. I asked if she lent it to anyone. She said no. I asked her to look in the driveway and see if it was still there. It wasn't. She began to freak out. I told her I would bring the leg to her tonight and where she could find her car tomorrow.

I called for a tow truck. Pretty soon one of the three or four drivers who take the calls at this time of night, who I see most nights I work, rolled up. He waved and shrugged and hooked it up and towed it away to the impound lot. The rain fell and the mist rolled and there wasn't even a piece of glass left on the pavement.

As I warmed up in the cruiser, a call for a burglar alarm, at a house, came over the radio. I drove to the address. I watched the windows. I met another officer there. We saw an open door. We went in. It could have been blown open by the wind. But what are the chances of that?

We moved together through the house. Street light and moonlight in strips on the floors. Listening. Looking. It was a big house. Through the great room and the kitchen. Through the home theatre with deep seats that could conceal anyone who wanted to hide there. Up a stairway and down a hall with no cover or room to maneuver. Into the meditation room. High windows. An altar with pictures of sages and saints, cushions, pristine oak floors, and a shelf of books.

Through the bedrooms, closets, under the beds, we looked in the attic, in the crawl spaces, in the basement, and as we moved from room to room we did it silently, carefully, slowly, with sharp awareness, mindful that the smallest sound or movement could be all

the warning we would have of the gunshot. It could come from behind any door, around any corner, out of nowhere. We knew that while usually it doesn't, sometimes it does, it is a sound that can split the universe in two, and you can die any time if your attention drifts for a second. And even if it doesn't.

Every night when I go to work, there are people who are in trouble. Wrapping their car around a pole or overdosing on heroin. Their door kicked in, their jewelry gone, or their children missing for hours. Or caught doing something they always do, but hardly ever get caught for.

Cops, like Bodhisattvas, are called to help. We help strangers every day. We risk our comfort and safety and convenience as a habit, as a job, as a way of life. We are trained to do it. Trained in the habit of service. Trained in the skills and methods that give us a chance to succeed.

When I go to work I do not go to further the interests of one group over another. I do not support corporate America over working people, or the nice over the irritating. I go to work to prevent harm.

I go to work to fulfill my oath to uphold the Constitution and my vow as a Bodhisattva. The understanding in both of these worlds is that killing, stealing, lying, intoxication, and being ruled by impulsive sexual desire cause suffering, for yourself and others. As a dharma teacher, it has been my job to persuade people that this is true. As a law enforcement officer, in the moment of crisis, it may be necessary to use coercion instead of persuasion to protect people from actual harm, and from the causes of suffering. We cannot say that one is spiritual and the other is not.

To be really at home in life, we cannot hide in a home theatre and relegate spiritual life to a meditation room cordoned off from the rest of the world. Of course we do need a peaceful place to meditate and to think. But the actual practice of spiritual life cannot be defined and sequestered. It will spread to the other rooms of the mansion, and radiate out to wherever you are, throughout space and time, with no boundaries. This is the nature of our mind and our lives. We cannot be separate from it for an instant.

The five Buddhist precepts I mentioned correspond to five key areas of criminal law. The three trainings which comprise the Buddhist path — morality, mental focus, and understanding — are all fully expressed in the realm of public service, as well as in dharma. The depth of philosophical exploration of the nature of reality and the function of karma — that is, the ways in which one's own actions form one's reality — are not matters of study or consideration within the ordinary scope of professional service, but the assumptions that underlie this profound philosophy, and the conclusions that can be drawn from it, are the operating assumptions of a life in public service. There is nothing off beat or unconventional about this, although it has not been explored too much in the west. It will be. Starting now.

Three a.m. I see headlights through the fog, moving very slowly, drifting across the road and jerking back into the travel lane, nicking a curb and jolting forward. I get behind the car and watch. I call in our location and the license plate number. I turn on my blue lights and stop the car. I watch him for a few seconds. He might bail out of the car and run. He might stare at me through the closed window. He might ask me what's this all about officer, while he tries not to slur his words or exhale his breathtaking booze breath. He might start crying and begging for a break. He might tell me his daughter used to go out with the chief's brother's son in high school and how he knows all the cops in town. He might reach for a gun as he opens his window and try his best to shoot me. You never know.

Am I mean for stopping him? Am I a prick who wants to get even with the world or boss people around? Do I have in mind that this guy may drift across the road into oncoming traffic and kill himself and someone else, and that people addicted to drugs or booze or with a selfish disregard for their lives and the lives of others would be out maiming and killing and hoping for the best, condemning themselves and others to unimaginable suffering if they are not stopped – even if it's late, and there are lots of places I might rather be? But that I have no way to complete my job in this world unless I do my part to take care of people, at least for a while, while I can?

These questions, and the answer I have come to, are not unique to me. In fact, they are what men have done and have chosen to do since the beginning of time. My karate teacher, Shoshin Nagamine, was a great Zen practitioner as well as Chief of Police on Okinawa, and was an advocate of the seamless union of public service and spiritual practice throughout his career.

You might say that there are so many ways in which law enforcement falls short of the Bodhisattva ideal and that the legal system is imperfect; and so many ways in which we human beings miss our chance to honestly live out our ideals.

According to Buddhism, the system will not be perfect until we are. And it is explained exactly how we can be, if we practice properly and sincerely, right now.

Ceaseless Practice

I live and die with the Buddhas and ancestors. They are my family, my friends, and my society.

Japanese Zen Master Dogen lived and wrote in the 13th century. He brought a fresh, simple Buddhism to Japan from China. It was based on practice, not the superstition and elaborate ritual that infused much of the Japanese Buddhism of his day.

His writing was collected as “the Treasury of the Eye of the True Dharma”, the Shobogenzo in Japanese.

Of the 95 essays in the long version, the section called Gyoji or Ceaseless Practice is the longest. In it Dogen says:

The Great Way of Buddhas and Ancestors invariably involves unsurpassed ceaseless practice. This practice rolls on in a cyclic manner without interruption. Not a moment's gap has occurred in Their giving rise to the intention to realize Buddhahood, in Their doing the training and practice, in Their experiencing enlightenment, and in Their realizing nirvana, for the Great Way of ceaseless practice rolls on just like this. As a result, the practice is not done by forcing oneself to do it and it is not done by being forced to do it by someone else: it is a ceaseless practice that is never tainted by forcing. The merits from this ceaseless practice sustain us and sustain others.

We all encounter demons. They may take the form of venomous public discourse, or a gang we meet while jogging quietly through a park. We may encounter them as we seek out distraction and gratification, or while suffocating in alienation.

The encounter can come out of nowhere and take us by surprise. Or we can see it coming a long way off. Engaging with demons blow for blow is generally a mistake. We get caught in their misery and hatred and become like them. But sometimes, in the grave extreme of danger, it may be necessary to sacrifice our safety and life to protect decency and decent people from harm.

Having a long or short life is not the most important thing. Dogen lived to be 53. The length of our lives is not up to us. The quality of our lives is. As we practice, we live out our own karma and create the conditions for our future.

There is no moment that is not a practice moment. We are all practicing something all the time. We can choose. We can prepare. We can condition our body and hearts and minds to use our lives for training. We can live our lives in the company of the Buddhas and ancestors. We can see the demon on the road, we can know what to do, and we can cultivate the ability to do it. We can live when it is time to live and die when it is time to die.

The morality of Buddhism is in conflict with the values of the modern world. Things which we are taught every day to accept as good and virtuous, Buddhism clearly explains, are the causes of suffering. We need to know which is true, which to engage with, which to avoid.

There were times and places when the leaders of society were concerned with the well-being of the people. And those societies could grow and prosper in peace. People could work and enjoy the results and take care of their families.

There have been many times and places where this was not so. Selfish idealists did not respect people or regard them as valuable. These powerful elites were occupied with bigger things.

In those times, like these, Buddhism was a radical response to ignorance and oppression. Practice was the light on the path, the path, the traveler, the rest and the destination.

It is that now.

As Dogen wrote:

The underlying principle of this practice is that the whole universe in all ten directions receives the merit of our ceaseless practice. Though others may not recognize it, though we may not recognize it ourselves, still, it is so. ... And, owing to our ceaseless practice, the Buddha's Way rolls perpetually onward.

Don't Just Do It

Wisdom starts with listening to the teaching. It continues as we use our natural wisdom, our ordinary intelligence, to reflect on what we have heard. Then we use our cultivated wisdom to put what we have learned into action.

We may hear a teaching that says that renunciation is the first step on the path — that to begin to do what we need to do to put an end to suffering for ourselves and others, we need to stop seeking refuge in things that will harm us. Money, sex, status, leisure and food will not bring us happiness. Generosity, patience, morality, effort, meditation, and wisdom will. This is not obvious. This is a teaching. You just heard it.

We are fortunate to hear it. But to do anything with it, we need to think about it. Examine it carefully. See if it's true. See how it might play out. That is contemplation. Step two.

If we are convinced, then we can practice what we understood. In action. In speech. In deep meditation. In insight. That is step three.

You can't understand it if you never heard it. You can't do it if you don't understand it. Even if you think it's a good idea, if your understanding is shallow, under pressure, you will not have the determination or courage to do the right thing.

There are people who say, 'Just do it.' The line was borrowed by Nike from Zen teaching in California in the 60's. It was as misunderstood in athletics as it was in Buddhism. At that time, there were many undisciplined hippies attracted to the Zen movement, the way young middle class boys are attracted to hip hop now. Sag your pants and you are in. There is nothing needed, nothing demanded, nothing to do. You are good enough as is. It failed them, of course.

Then as now, if you are an untrained person getting up to spar with an experienced, well-trained martial artist, and you 'just do it,' you will just get your ass kicked. If your mom is dropping you off at middle school, someone will surely see through your gangsta act and steal your weed or your lunch money.

If you take your seat at the Zen center and just do it for an hour or a weekend or a week – without any preconceptions, or training, or intention – then all your untrained habits, expectations, and mental chaos will accompany you.

There is a time for spontaneity. But spontaneity is not the same as impulsiveness. If you have been playing the saxophone assiduously for 20 years, you may be able to get on stage with a band for the first time and just do it. If it's the first time you picked up a horn, you will barely be able to wet your reed.

Putting an end to suffering forever for yourself and all other beings is more difficult than jazz improvisation. How can people be persuaded they can just do it? Musicians don't

believe that, pilots don't, athletes don't, but the credulous and the poseurs who want quick answers to difficult problems do.

And leaders of religious groups want followers, and will pander to that inclination.

But that won't help us.

What will help us is doing the work. Hearing the teachings. Contemplating them. Manifesting them in our body, speech and mind.

Because we live in a bankrupt nation in a decadent time, we are surrounded by juvenile behavior. Impulsiveness, self indulgence, self centeredness, and emotional volatility rule the public discourse and rule the economy too – from the entitled, to the demanding, to the drug dealers, to their slaves.

Children were not admitted to the Buddha's community. 2500 years ago in India a young person had to be at least 20 years old to be ordained, and that was in a time when youth was much shorter than it is today. Children were excluded because they did not have the emotional stability or maturity to focus on a difficult a long term goal, one which requires a persistent willingness to sacrifice comfort and change ones inclinations to meet the demands of difficult and worthy life.

People who have not entered into adulthood, regardless of their age, should be excluded from the community today as well, unless they are willing to mature.

Maturity requires consistent cultivation. Many parents have abdicated this responsibility. Schools have abdicated it. Commerce, politics, culture, and drug dealers, legal and not, have abdicated that responsibility and, in fact, pander to the juvenilization of our people, especially of young men.

It wrecks them as people. It disqualifies them as spiritual practitioners.

But if we, as teachers and as practitioners, take the responsibility to demand diligence and discipline from ourselves and the people we work with, no one will be disqualified. Everyone can enter the community.

We can't 'just do it.' But we can do it. And we need to do it now.

How to Save The World

Prince Charles said recently that his job was to “save the world.” Even if he can’t do it, he may think that by setting himself the task, he can help restore relevance and high purpose to the institution of British Royalty, which is suspect and expensive.

What is interesting about his statement is not that it is so grandiose, but that it is so common.

Untested, immature and self-regarding people often think it is up to them to save the world. Sitting in their dorm rooms at midnight, minds afire with righteous reading and unfulfilled desire; sitting on the bed at Mom’s house approaching middle age, minds afire with failed projects, desperate for one-step vindication; sitting in the reading room of the British Museum covered in boils, conspiring against people who wouldn’t give him a second thought; trashing SUV’s, killing people and burning houses so animals can run free; fantasizing about their own annihilation and emergence into paradise embraced by a blossoming flower of destruction that will consume hundreds, thousands, millions of non-believers; with minds reaching across empires thousands of years old, teaching the necessity and virtue of murder.

They all think they are destined to save the world.

But what world is it they think they will save? Not the one they look around and see. That is the world they will need to wreck. The idea that appeals to them places them at the center of creation. Like an infant, they do not see other people as deserving of respect and consideration, but rather as either obstacles or avenues to the easing of their own unhappiness.

They inhabit an imaginary world, and it is that imaginary world they imagine saving.

This is not to say that there is nothing to be done to save the world. It is to say that no good will come from forcing the world to fit a fantasy. Being selfish and impatient, all one can do is disturb people and cause them harm. What can we do?

There is a list of six things you can do to save the world.

The first one is to help people out. Help them get what they need to be safe and happy. They might not notice you are doing it. They might not appreciate it. But it will bring happiness into the world if you do it.

The second is to behave decently. That means, don’t kill people, don’t lie to them, or steal from them, even if you can rationalize it or make excuses for it. Don’t smash your brains with drink and drugs, because you will waste your life if you do. Don’t pursue wrong sexual activity as a road to happiness, because you will ruin your relationships, cut yourself off from others, and be distracted from what it is that actually can bring lasting

happiness.

The third one is to refuse to be roused to anger. This does not mean that you should tolerate cruelty or injustice or cultivate a meek good nature that is just okay with all the crap of the world. It means that you maintain courageous calm when faced with difficulty or crisis, and proceed with skill where you can be of help. Sometimes this will mean you take the time to persuade jerks that it is not in their interest to persist in their harmful acts. Sometimes it means you act decisively and vigorously to stop harm.

The fourth is joyful effort: making consistent effort to do what's right despite difficulty, disrespect or danger.

The fifth is cultivating a calm, clear mind.

The sixth is learning to see the world as it is without the distorting filters and limited perspective we are stuck with as a result of our past non-virtuous acts.

A while ago while on patrol, I had a call for two people fighting. It was not a fair fight, a schoolyard scuffle, or a sporting match. The smaller person was getting hurt and although I did not know why they were doing this, I did not need to know why to know it was not okay. As a cop, you do not have the option of turning away, thinking, Oh well, that's just their karma. And you can't say, Hey, somebody should call the cops.

Two of us responded to the scene. If we hesitated, the smaller of the two could get killed. When commands did not stop the fight, we grabbed the big fellow and pulled him away. While he was being assisted to the ground, his opponent began to yell at me about why we were always harassing them, and to get the fuck out of there.

At times like that, you really have to know what you are doing. Not just when to move in, or when to wait for more back up, not just how to apply a joint lock and get the cuffs on before someone pulls a baseball bat out of the car and takes a swing. Although, yes, tactical skills are important, and at that point, it's too late if you have not studied and practiced well.

But equally important: you have to know for sure that you are right. Right to risk your safety to protect someone's health or save their life; confident that vigorous action to prevent harm is justified, and that standing by when harm is being done is not; sure that being appreciated is nice, but not necessary.

We did a generous thing for them. The big fellow did not collect the karma, or the prison sentence, for murdering the smaller one. The smaller one did not die, or spend weeks recovering, or a lifetime disabled.

What cops do every day stands in contrast to what the grandiose world-savers do. If you are going to save the world, you will have to at least be able to save real people, nice or

not.

Grandchildren steal from their own grandparents. Thugs prey upon the vulnerability and kindness of their neighbors. Marketers exploit the desires and credulity of an audience of passive, needy viewers. Oceans get fouled. Water gets rationed.

Somehow, real human beings, in Hamlet's description: "noble in reason, infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action like angels, in apprehension how like gods, the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals" — are willing to be confined in asphalt and concrete prisons, cities, that seem the inevitable vessel of human culture, as if they had sprung fully formed from the black heart of le Corbusier, and there could be no other way to live.

Disrespecting people will not save the world. Forcing people to conform to an imaginary ideal will not do it. Blowing them up will not do it. Accepting things as they are will not do it.

But it can be done. And it will have to be done by us.

Karate: An Antidote to Modernism

The practice of any traditional art is largely a process of negation. This is the source of the power of these arts. It is why they continue to exist, providing a source of nourishment and fulfillment for generation after generation. But this fact is sometimes very hard to grasp, because it contradicts our habits of thought.

In modern life, we regard innovation and accumulation as good. Often they are not. Contemporary art and pop culture, for example, often mock kindness, commend cruelty, and spread misery. As we accumulate wealth and gain access to sophisticated technology, our lives are dominated by the unintended negative consequences of their use.

For example, millions of people sit in traffic for hours in big, fast cars. Millions are forced to spend billions of dollars on drugs and treatments for sickness caused by overeating, inactivity, drinking and smoking.

In traditional arts, we find an antidote to the mistaken assumptions that we modern people take for granted and hold us back. In traditional practice, instead of setting our hearts on innovation and accumulation, we master a body of knowledge handed down and use it, as a whetstone, to polish our bodies and minds. We wear down the imperfections in our bodies and fix the distortions in our minds. We get rid of the bad habits and junk that stand in the way of our freedom of movement, freedom to think, and freedom to live. This is true in the process of learning any traditional art, whether it be music, painting, martial arts, metal work, carpentry, or scholarship.

In karate, our kata — pre-arranged movement sequences — require us to move in a way that is unfamiliar. Memorizing a sequence of moves is called the “embusen,” and it is the first stage of learning kata.

The next step is called “ren ma” in Japanese. These words translate as “pounding and polishing” – the process used to craft a sword that is strong and resilient. Like pounding and polishing, the high heat and pressure of training, alternating with recovery and rest, repeated continually over the years, make the karate practitioner strong and resilient.

During ren ma practice, over a course of years or decades, we go beyond the limits of our bodies, and beyond those in our character as well. Like the flaws or impurities in the metal of a sword blade, the defects in our habits of movement or in our habits of mind are revealed and removed.

As we continue to polish away resistance and imperfection, the subtle gaps between will, mind, and body that hamper freedom of action disappear.

The result of this intense self-discipline is freedom. This is the direct path. There is no

other way to get there.

After decades of dedicated practice, we may leave ren ma behind. This next stage might be called mastery. Although it is rarely achieved, it forms an ideal which we can pursue, attain sporadically at first, and then deepen through our practice, for a lifetime.

In many dojos, the objective of martial arts is not training. It's entertainment. The students are rewarded with empty ranks and praise, and activity is not focused, but guided moment to moment by impulse, rather than by a vision of what a human being can be.

Kids come for a month or two, play, get ten patches, a tangerine belt, a silk jacket, learn a different animal move every week, and next season it's on to the next thing. This is not the worst thing in the world. It can be cute. But the children will walk away with nothing of value, and when they come across a genuine opportunity to train in a way that demands something of them, they turn away.

Because of their experience with a phony reward structure, they become cynical about the training process and the motives of the participants. They grow up accustomed only to stimulation and amusement. When I visit friends around the country and I see what goes on in their kids' martial arts places, and they tell me about the hundreds of dollars a month they have to spend on all sorts of extras, they ask me: Is this right? Is this what martial arts is supposed to be about?

In a traditional approach to karate, there is a set curriculum. People are introduced to specific techniques and kata in sequence as they progress. For a while, accumulation of new knowledge is emphasized. However, if their attachment to accumulation is not set aside, practitioners will not get any better. They will be distracted by novelty and will fail to develop, muscle memory, deep focus, and a strong will. They will fail to achieve deep skill: the capacity for spontaneous action and self-command. They will become arrogant, insecure and brittle.

I often practice one kata for an hour or more at a time. I have focused on one kata for a decade. It is not entertaining, but it is not boring, either. That is because my intention is engaged when I practice: I am seeking some results from my practice, and I am pouring my heart into achieving it. If I was distracted by having to come up with new things to work on all the time, or if I was locked into rigid assumptions about my practice and was afraid to discover and learn new things, I would accomplish nothing substantial. It is liberating to be able to just train - freely, without the encumbrance of stray thought or uncertain movement.

In karate, it is this kind of deep, austere training that allows an understanding of the deeper levels of the art: of grappling, point strikes, power transmission, and dynamic body shifting. Insights will continue to come as long as we train, as we dissolve the obstacles to knowledge.

The Anatomy of Motive

The day begins, and thousands of impressions pour in through our senses. Some of them we notice, most of them we don't, and a few get our attention for a while.

We sometimes don't notice that we are choosing our experience. Not by conscious intention, but most of the time, by habit. We see what we usually see. Our experience is filtered by our expectations, and we do not notice our participation in creating the content of our reality.

If we cultivate a frame of mind that says "same shit different day," that will begin to define our experience, no matter the content of the new day. If you are angry and habituate to being angry, you will find things to be angry about. This may be obvious if you watch the news. The targets of the anger change, but the flow of anger does not.

It may be less obvious that if we are tuned in to the blessings and miracles that rise around us continually, we will see more of them. We will not be like the lost Gurdjieff traveling far in search of the miraculous, looking in strange places where it can never be found. We will not be like the poor boy wandering the roads of India in ancient times, begging for food, seeking his lost, half-recalled inheritance — only to discover that his dad had sewn it into the lining of the coat he had been wearing from the start of his journey.

As we look around, it is sometimes difficult to fathom how people can see what we see and see something totally different. It is perplexing and sometimes terrifying to note that people soak themselves in cruelty and poison and delight in it, or fail to see magnificence and bomb it.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, though lacking as a role model, could be pretty sharp when he had his thinking cap on. And I think he had it on when he wrote his famous note in the margin of his copy of Shakespeare's "Othello." Coleridge wrote the note to explain why Othello's buddy Iago tricked Othello into murdering the person he loved the most, a person who loved him completely, too. Iago's act seems inexplicable, one of completely senseless evil. Coleridge scribbled in the margin of the play:

"The motive-hunting of motiveless malignity."

He was describing the imbecilic Nietzschean delight in the exercise of power over another, which depends not for grievance or even gain on its selection of a target, but only on a convenient opportunity to act. Justification follows conception, if the act is pre-meditated. Justification for the act comes after the fact, if the act is impulsive. But in neither case is the justification for the act the cause of the act.

The cause of the act is mental habit. What we can call a karmic propensity. A tendency to act based on long habit of acting that way.

There are people prowling the night looking for the bodies of strangers to have sex with. Does it seem the best type of life to everyone? Does it to them, after a while? But still, some do it, and some do it when it brings misery instead of pleasure, and some do it till they die of it.

The call to hate appeals to many people who already have hate in their heart, and now have a convenient object toward to direct their pre-existing mental state. This feels elevating to them. They are filled with purpose. Their once formless and disturbing hate now gives them a place in the world.

Glimpse the grannies stuffing their social security checks into slot machines on the back wall of a convenience store on Route 66 in the desert at midnight, and you will see the force of habit in action.

Watch a nurse move through a children's burn unit and see the care and kindness she pours into each baby, and you will also see the force of habit.

It is a two-sided force: what you see is the result of an accumulation of habit, and it is establishing a habit, forming the cause for future acts of the same kind.

The good news is, we can choose our mental habits, so we can determine the course of our life.

With an agitated mind, these mental habits are difficult to change. Just like when you are speeding in a car, it is much harder to change direction than when you are going slow.

Sometimes we change course by "hitting bottom" with a sudden shock that allows our mental filters to dissolve, and the scales to fall from our eyes, as we have insight into the habits that are guiding us, insight into the self-imposed cause of our suffering.

Sometimes we can change our mental habits without that terrible medicine. Sometimes the insight can come in quiet and stillness, in the presence of a teacher or a teaching which directs our mind to the path that puts an end to ignorance. A path which, if we follow it scrupulously, leads to the end of suffering for ourselves and others forever.

The path is: treating ourselves and others decently, settling down and seeing clearly.

Those three parts of the path are described in thousands of volumes of the traditional Buddhist canon. This path has been travelled infinite times by living beings. And we do not have to study the whole library to find the trailhead. We can take the first step now.

The Locus of Subjectivity

Children and teenagers, without adult guidance, are governed by what they want. Genuine adults are governed by purpose. This is a natural choice, because it frees us from the self-imposed slavery of permanent adolescence, of being permanently ruled by dissatisfaction and desire.

I have noticed, in the life-long practice of self-defense, that as people mature in their practice, their definition of self changes, and their understanding of defense changes as well. One of the afflictions of contemporary martial arts is its heavy reliance on self-regard. People are focused on getting approval from their teacher and on improving their abilities, so their practice becomes narcissistic — because it's all about them — and technically limited, because performance is all about pleasing the teacher and achieving status within a limited group. Many pursuits – sports, school, politics, and work – may be structured in this way.

Those who do mature in their martial arts find a purpose for what they have discovered.

One of the things that changes is their locus of subjectivity. When we start martial arts, we think of ourselves mainly as our body, and we learn to defend it. That is a good start. As we mature, as human beings as well as practitioners, we understand that we are not separate from the world around us. For example, we need to draw nourishment from the earth several times a day. We are connected to it and dependent upon it. And it needs our care too.

There are people we love and want to take care of; there are neighbors and others to whom we feel kinship and friendliness and human connection that make our lives possible. There are universal virtues which, if we live by them, make our lives wonderful and our humanity genuine, and which, ultimately, will free us and all the people with whom we share this world, from suffering. The boundary of our self, the way we perceive who we are, and the ways in which we protect our world, change.

If you are walking across the street and a car comes toward you, you see it and jump out of the way. Your locus of subjectivity is in your own body. When you are walking across the street with your child and a car comes toward him, you immediately pull your child to safety. It is not a considered act. There is no weighing of options, pausing to reflect on the merit of the act in light of the interests of the self that resides inside your body. You act because in that moment your locus of subjectivity is centered in that person you love.

If you are serving in the military or in law enforcement, if you are a warrior, there is no question about your duty under pressure. There is no doubt that the motivation for your actions in the extreme of danger is taking care of the people for whom you are responsible.

For heroes, for leaders, in the decisive moment, their locus of subjectivity does not reside

in their own body. They do not conceive of their selves as bounded by narrow, calculating self interest or personal safety. Their self encompasses all of those for whom they are responsible, all of the people they lead, all of the people they serve. It is why the Dalai Lama's concern for the suffering people of Tibet is so moving. You can feel that for him, his life is indistinguishable from theirs. You can feel how he suffers as they suffer, and how painful it is for him, as their leader and as their servant, to be unable to help them very much.

In Buddhism, the Bodhisattva ideal creates a locus of subjectivity even more encompassing than that of the hero. The obligation to others, and the suffering one willingly takes on, are greater than that of a parent, greater than that of a warrior, greater than that of a hero. Because the Bodhisattva commitment has no boundary.

The locus of subjectivity encompasses all beings. Everyone is beloved. Every one's suffering is yours, as much as the suffering of your own vulnerable and innocent child is yours. As we aspire and train to fulfill this ideal, we increase our capacity to succeed in it. Our idea of what our 'self' is changes. Our idea of how to defend this 'self' transforms from a limited ideal of personal safety to the unlimited purpose of saving all beings from suffering forever, using all the skill and strength and energy we have.

Start by being responsible for one other person's happiness for a few minutes today, and then proceed from there. And don't stop until you are done. This is how we move our locus of subjectivity from a point to a universal and realize a person is a Buddha.

What Happens in Vegas Permeates the Universe throughout Space and Time

The thousands of volumes of the Buddhist canon and the commentarial literature are concerned with why we suffer. The reason it's such a hot topic is because if you know why you suffer, you can stop the causes of suffering and use your time for things you'd rather do. Seems like a good idea. So peering into the many pages there, you will see that the Buddha explains that the chief cause of suffering is ignorance.

Not just general ignorance, like not knowing things. Not knowing that Carson City is the capital of Nevada is not going to be a major cause of suffering. That type of ignorance – of specific facts or a lack of intelligence at accumulating knowledge – is secondary. If that type of knowledge preoccupies you, according to scripture, you are aspiring to be like an eagle who can see so much from a distance, not aspiring to be a Buddha, who has the skill and knowledge to put an end to suffering, for himself and others, forever.

Ignorance, as a technical Buddhist term, refers specifically to several classes of not-understanding. The most important of these kinds of ignorance is the lack of understanding that our actions have consequences. What we do and what we have done will influence the quality of our lives in the future.

Now, if you happen to be elected to the Nevada state legislature and you don't know enough to go to Carson City when the legislature convenes, then it might be a source of suffering for you. And if out of this secondary, lack-of-facts type of ignorance you end up in Las Vegas by mistake, then you may indeed be royally screwed. But not just because you will miss the opening gavel of the legislative session. No. It may be much more serious than that. Because in Las Vegas you will encounter, again and again, on posters, billboards, t-shirts, and in the hearts and minds of your fellow lost, wisdom according to The Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority: What Happens in Vegas Stays in Vegas.

That is a golden nugget of real, genuine ignorance. It expresses the essential mistake that produces suffering.

I in no way mean to personally criticize the individual members of the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority, current or past. They may be good people. They may love their children, pet their dogs, mow their lawns, give to charity, recycle religiously, and eat as vegan as possible. Or they might intentionally be bent on enticing the world to drink to excess and covet their neighbor. I do not know. I do know the effect of their slogan on people who fall for it.

Because the only thing that stays in Vegas is the dough of the folks who go there. What "happens" in Vegas is a totally different story. Take a look at that verb: "Happens." It's passive. When things "happen," it implies that people didn't do them. They just happened. There was no will involved. No volition. And by the way, no responsibility and no blame. What a deal! But it is a false promise.

It is notable that this very expression appears again and again in interviews with criminal suspects. You interview a guy who you have on camera shooting another guy. You have eyewitnesses. You have blood, DNA, ballistics, clothing, the whole thing. You have no doubt. But the suspect will tell the story like this: "...Yeah, we were talking, there was an argument, and then the shooting happened..." Even if you know they did it, and they know you know, they often won't own what they did. They can't get themselves to say, "I did it." They'll say, "it happened." But it did not just happen. He did it.

And what happens in Vegas, like what happens everywhere else, happens because people do things. People make it happen. People doing things and saying things and thinking things is "karma"—the Sanskrit for "action", and for the result of action. Karma does not just happen.

When you or I do wrong or right, we see ourselves act, and this perception plants a seed in our mind. It forms not only a memory, but a karmic propensity which colors our future perceptions, and which also will have a result in the future. If, for example, we frequently plant mental seeds of anger by having angry thoughts, using angry words, doing angry actions, and being attracted to situations and people that support our inclination to anger, then we will frequently encounter an angry world. It is not magic; it is logic. It is easy to see it play out in our own lives.

To a great degree, we choose what we do. If we are passive, if we allow life to 'happen' to us, we just gamble with life and ultimately, inevitably, we lose.

If we go to Las Vegas — or anywhere — and we lie, steal, cheat, engage in sexual misconduct, use intoxicants -- those acts don't stay in Vegas. We see ourselves do those acts, and to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the seriousness of the act and to how habitual the acts are, we plant seeds in our mind which condition our future choices, the way we perceive ourselves, who we choose to hang out with, where we choose to hang out, and what we choose to do when we get there.

The idea that our actions do not have definite consequences is one of the classic definitions of ignorance, according to Buddhism. It is the mistake that leads us to easily condition ourselves to a lifetime of harmful acts. These acts are considered "wrong" because they cause suffering. The premise is that if you were not ignorant of the nature of things, you would not do things that will ultimately harm you – even if the first contact with these things appears pleasurable. If you are acting on the basis of ignorance, then you will easily be seduced by wrong acts – stealing, lying, sexual misconduct, violence – which appear to further your happiness, but ultimately cause just the opposite.

If we had wisdom in our minds instead of ignorance, its opposite, we would not be so easily seduced by bad ideas. Ideas that confirm what we want to believe, that reinforce our ignorance. Ideas that hold that indulging in pleasures that waste our brief and precious lives and time, our work, bodies and minds, and those of others, are simply

innocuous entertainments. Bad ideas that say these acts will have no consequences. That you can cordon off your misdeeds geographically and leave them behind, in Vegas, or anywhere else. That you can take a break from living a decent life, and that afterwards you can go back to observing conventional mores, and no one will be the wiser.

Whatever we do stays with us. Yes, our bodies will decline and disappear. As will our minds. No monument, work of art, scientific formula or masterful work of literature will last very long after we have gone. What will last is the effect we have on others. We all teach continually. If there are nothing but examples of ignorance around, then that ignorance will pervade the culture and the world and echo through the generations, as human life declines and people suffer more and more. If there are examples of decency, dignity, purpose and maturity, then that influence will also spread out through space and time, unhindered, through the hearts and minds of people whose lives are uplifted by the example, and whose suffering is dispelled by following in your footsteps.

So do what you do. But be guided by the knowledge that whatever you do will stay with you and ripple out through space and time, pervading the universe, forever.

Training well tips the odds in your favor.

The Crucible of Karma

A dojo is a collection of karma — human actions and accumulated mental habits— that we label as a dojo. Since a dojo is made only of actions, it follows that if you want to create a good dojo – or a good family or a good company or a good country – we need to do what’s right. Our lives are made of actions. Answering the question of what to do and what to avoid is essential.

In the Abhidharma, an ancient collection of Buddhist doctrine, there is a description of the cosmos. It is fundamental to an understanding of Indian Buddhism, but it is generally ignored by contemporary Buddhists. Abhidharma cosmology seems to be a relic of pre-scientific, ignorant times. It seems to be mistaken, a flaw, irrelevant. It is regarded as the Asian facsimile of Ptolemy or the Flat Earth Society. Something you might study if you were interested in the history of science, but not a place to look for truth. This misses the point. As an analog of our inner geography, it’s as precise as an atomic clock.

The Abhidharma describes a vast ocean from which four continents arise. These four continents are arranged around the base of a huge central mountain, Mount Meru. Humans live on one of the continents, the continent called “Endurance.” If a person were to travel in any direction away from Mount Meru, he would eventually encounter a range of iron mountains. It would be impossible to walk around the mountain range, because the range is a circle completely surrounding Mount Meru. If, with great effort and determination, the person climbed up and over the iron mountain range, he could keep going for a while, but before too long, he would encounter another ring of mountains. Struggle on? There’s another and another, seven of them, until, if he chose to persevere despite the difficulty, he would arrive at the nothing, at the edge of the world.

So let’s say our traveler has discovered that heading away from the center of the world, no matter how far he goes, will yield only exhaustion. If this person, seeing the futility of his earlier efforts was still inclined to travel, he could only head inward, toward the central axis of the world.

There, he could go up or down. Going up a mountain takes effort, more effort than staying in place. And going up the central mountain takes more energy than climbing the rings of iron mountain ranges, because it is much taller. But this ascent is worth the work. There, through the clouds, are the heavens. Thirty-three of them, each one more joyous and more glorious than the last, populated by gods and angels and other heavenly beings. And up beyond them are the Buddha realms, paradises completely beyond suffering.

What if the traveler, instead of ascending, heads downward? Going down is easy. It takes passivity, or stupidity, not energy or intelligence. If we expend our life energy in thrall of our impulses, or in hot pursuit of poisonous things, we descend further and faster.

On the surface of the world, the human and animal realms mingle. Down below Mount

Meru, on the central axis of the world, are the lower realms. Below, if we descend, we come first to the realm of the hungry ghosts. They spend their lives there desperate for food and drink. They are in constant agony, searching everywhere, but they rarely find anything that will satisfy them. If they do they find something to eat or drink, they suffer more, because their mouths are too small to sip, and their throats are too small to swallow. Sometimes, when they find water to quench their thirst, it burns their lips like fire. Sometimes they see what looks like a fresh, cool stream, but as they approach, it transforms into a river of blood and pus.

Further down, below Mount Meru are the hells. Eight hot hells, eight cold hells. The suffering of beings in hell starts as horrific, and should they descend to the lower hells, gets unimaginably worse.

The scriptural descriptions of these realms are elaborate. Nevertheless, an overall theme is implicit: mere expenditure of energy is not enough to have a good life. In fact, by moving away from the central axis, we expend our lives fruitlessly. This represents a path of relentless accumulation. It leads nowhere. No matter how much wealth, fame, information, worldly power one accumulates, where does it lead? Sought for its own sake, what does it come to?

This cosmological metaphor captures accurately the futility of the attempt to master the universe through the accumulation of scriptural knowledge, scientific knowledge, pleasurable sense experiences, philosophy, etc. All these worldly goals hold out the promise of happiness, providing us with temporary satisfactions, but leaving us, in the end, without a lasting source of happiness. We exhaust ourselves, exhaust our lives, and never achieve our aim. Our goals recede endlessly, while new ones appear, again and again as the next ring of iron mountains, far in the distance.

This represents the mental habit of always wanting, and so, always wanting more. It describes the futility of seeking happiness out there, somewhere where it will never be found, no matter how intrepid our search.

What will actually make a difference in the quality of our lives is the moral valence of our action. If we behave virtuously, we ascend. If we behave non-virtuously, we descend. Whether you are a banker, teacher, car collector, supermodel or mail carrier, you have a choice every moment as to whether your mental condition and your actions are virtuous, non-virtuous or neutral. You can waste your life, condemn yourself to suffer, or free yourself from suffering forever.

You do not have to apprehend the subtleties of Zen stories to gain this view or to walk this path. Anyone, in any religion, in any walk of life, can do it.

Whether or not you take these specific cosmological descriptions to represent actual locations in space and time is not the point here. The metaphor, as a guideline for action here and now, is accurate. Whether you are an artist, a scientist, teacher, a parent or

anything else, the implication of this teaching is not to suggest that you abandon your pursuit. But rather, to be sure that you are motivated by a desire to put an end to suffering for all beings, and that you work as hard and skillfully as you can to realize that motivation.

According to this cosmology, what determines your ascent or descent are your actions and mental habits, i.e., your karma. Birth in some of the heavens, for example, is the result of habitually experiencing the pleasure of certain meditative mental states in this life. Birth in others is the result of profound and continual kindness. Other, higher heavens are the destination for individuals who dedicate their lives to achieving the deepest states of peace and understanding.

A future as a hungry ghost is the natural and unavoidable outcome of greed, hoarding, constantly wanting, and depriving others of what they need while you have plenty. Eons in the hells are the destiny of those who killed and committed other terrible crimes, who did so repeatedly, thought of it as good, and wanted to do it some more.

It is possible to study the means by which karma works—how all the things we do, say and think plant seeds in our minds, and how these seeds germinate and have their effects on us later. But even without understanding the intricate mechanics of karma, we can get useful guidance from this cosmological description of what is good to do and what is harmful. If we take it to heart, we can live a worthy life.

Every Move You Make

There are plenty of ways to explain the way we make choices, and how our lives take shape. But none is as complete as karma. Karma, meaning “action,” refers to what we do, say and think, and the way our actions condition the way we see the world and act in it.

Karma does not deny the function of personal psychology, but it does place it in a meaningful and more explanatory context. Take the idea that we make our life choices in an effort to overcome some early trauma. This theory of psychological compensation explains very little. The reasons why certain conditions came together to produce the initial difficulties in the life of this particular person, the way that person responds, their ultimate triumph over it or their failure to triumph, the happiness or misery that results, the effect the example has on others, why similar childhood conditions work out in very different ways in different lives -- none of that is explained by an explanation limited to personal psychology.

Is neuroscience more illuminating? One glorious Saturday afternoon in autumn, a group of divorced soccer dads was standing around at the sidelines during a game. Between plays, they were discussing their divorces, their finances, their fiancées, and the events that brought them to their present state of affairs. It was a rare opportunity for communion. They talked about how bad their first wives were. Their flaws. Their tyrannical pettiness. The impossible situations in which they (the guys) were placed. The emotional vacuum. The unfair either/or choices they were forced into. The endless legal troubles. The expense. The kids.

One fellow explained that his troubles started with his amygdala. “It’s primitive and powerful, and when that baby kicks in, forget about it,” he said. He knew about his amygdala. It made him feel better and you can’t blame the guy for clinging to that little almond-shaped gland while his ship sank. But his understanding of it was a fiction. A useful way to explain away free will and personal responsibility. A convenient fantasy. Like the great puppeteer in the sky, the man behind the curtain, the flat earth, or happily ever after. Here was the homunculus at the center of his pre-determined universe. By selecting secretions as the explanation, he could take himself out of the game of his own life, and stand on the sidelines for a while.

I have heard people offer that kind of explanation for the experience of training in karate: my reptile brain responds to stress by generating signals cueing either aggression or flight. My neocortex censors these impulses with memories, the results of past aggressive action, say, and my limbic brain is flooded with feelings about it. We seek a way to harness that energy, to ameliorate the frustration, to streamline the mental activity so all the parts work harmoniously, and add a dose of serotonin and endorphins at the same time.

Now let’s say that this is true, as far as it goes, and understand that we could create a much more detailed description of brain function. It may go some way toward

explaining how, but that is as far as this explanation can go, no matter how detailed it becomes. It still would not explain *why* we do what we do.

“How” is for science. “Why” is beyond the scope of science. A car crashes. Two people are in it. One lives. One dies. A kid asks why. An engineer or a doctor can answer about the design of the car, the surface of the road, the angle of the impact, the position of the body of the victim. Which explain how. But why one died and the other lived is not a question amenable to scientific analysis.

There are enough innocent sufferers all over the world, whose actions we might judge to be good or bad, who are young and old, rich and poor, black and white, and so on, to justify putting real effort into a search for an answer to “Why?”

This search uncovers four schemes that people use to explain events: 1. The inscrutable will of God; 2. Meaningless chance; 3. Mechanical determinism; or 4. The operation of karma.

These are hard to test for truth simply by tracing the sequence of causes that led to the result, because we do not have access to the full vast constellation of causes for any event. However, we can test each one of these explanatory schemes pragmatically. We can examine the results a person will get if he chooses any one of the four as an assumption on which to base life choices.

The four postulates are not equally successful in explaining what happened, predicting what will happen, or in prescribing the actions that are most advisable. They suggest very different ways of living.

Generally speaking, the first leads to submission. Programs of action include supplicating, propitiating, and hoping for the best. Done in an unhealthy way, this orientation can lead to passivity, dread and magical thinking. Undertaken in a healthy way, it can lead to giving up one’s own egotism and dedicating one’s self to prayer and good works, for the sake of peace in this world, and the hope of reward in the future.

The second, a belief that the world is governed by meaningless chance, leads to pleasure seeking, impulsiveness, and alternating states of anxiety, depression, yearning, hopelessness, and an abdication of personal responsibility. Dice hanging from the mirror, the pedal to the metal, asleep in the back seat, when your number’s up, your number’s up.

The third holds the assumption that our fates are foreordained and there is nothing we can do but ride the train and see what station we arrive at when we get there. It takes your life out of your hands and can make you nervous or pompous or passive or all of those.

The fourth gives you both the responsibility and the means to take control of your life

and make of it what you want. If you act virtuously, you have as happy a life as you can possibly have. Every action, of your body, speech and mind, counts. Nothing is wasted.

My karma — the actions that I take now and the actions I took in the past — constitute my life. Therefore I should, as well as I can, examine my motivation for action, the quality of the action itself and the results of each thing I do, say, or think. Then I can tell if my action will bring happiness or unhappiness to me and to others.

Our actions affect the quality of our own lives, but we also teach as we live. We influence everyone we come in contact with, for good or ill. We may never know how far our influence will reach.

If this were a simple matter of our influence on others working like a closed, physical system, like ripples on the surface of a pond, or echoes in a tunnel, our effects could be discounted, because with each new ripple, echo, or person influenced, a little of the initial energy would be dissipated. And eventually the karmic energy would dissipate and our effect would be gone. But it doesn't work quite that way. Karma is as likely to magnify as it is to dissipate, depending on the conditions of the minds it touches.

For example: You are riding along in your car and you accidentally cut someone off, or he thinks you did, while you are changing lanes to exit. He becomes enraged. He speeds up, tailgates you, shakes his fist at you, gives you the finger, curses at you and starts chasing you down the exit ramp.

You can stay cool. When the enraged nut pulls up beside you, you raise your hand palm out, chin elevated, and say, Sorry, I didn't see you. Then the guy says, Watch what you're doing, asshole! and drives away.

Or he chases you down the exit ramp, you have had it up to here, you get angry. You get out of your car, he gets out of his car, and fists or chains or bullets fly, and one guy is dead, and someone is arrested. It costs a lot of money for the defense, a lot of time and emotional energy and pain, and lots of lives are torn up.

This situation was in the news: two women, both young mothers, armed and driving in Florida. They got mad at each other and long story short one got killed on the side of the road and the other one is facing a death sentence.

Why was the first person able to drive away calmly, no big deal, where the second person felt compelled to get into a confrontation over it? The same conditions were present, with two completely different outcomes. Luck will not account for it. What was the difference between these? Which one would you rather be?

The difference was karma. Karma does not mean fate or chance or conditions. It means action, in the present time, as well as the results of past action, which have accumulated as mental seeds, formed mental habits and predispositions and which bloom when the

conditions are right.

We all have a responsibility that extends far beyond our own lives. We can have a wonderful effect on people. We will have some effect. We have an opportunity to put this idea into practice every day.

Every Day is a Good Day

"Every day is a good day."

This is a quote from a Zen koan, spoken by Zen Master Yun Men, who lived and taught in 10th century China.

To have the conviction that every day is a good day means that we are living our own lives. If we discriminate based on our own feelings of happiness or unhappiness and say, "I wonder if today will be good," or "Today I am happy so it is a good day," or "Today I am unhappy so today is a bad day," or "If something nice happens to me today then today will be a good day," then we are living passively, as if life is just something that happens to us.

On some days we will suffer. Then, when that is necessary, when that is the reality of our lives, it is our day to suffer. Some days we will be happy. Then it will be a good day to be happy. Some days we will have to struggle. Then it will be a good day to struggle. Some day we will need to fight. Then it will be a good day to fight. Some day it will be our day to die. Then, as Black Elk said, it will be a good day to die.

This way we are responsible for our own lives. Every day is a perfect opportunity to face what we need to face.

When we learn a new kata, we are asked to move in unfamiliar ways. At first it is difficult and awkward. Then our movement becomes agile and powerful. If the kata is well made, we see good results from our effort to master it. The kata is asking us to change our physical habits in a way that adds skill, removes obstructions, makes us more free.

That is the way it is with "Every day is a good day." We can use it as a philosophical kata. If we apply it, test it, and return to it under the pressure of the moment and in calm reflection, it will strengthen our mind and our life.

Human Relationships and Their Fragments

A traditional martial arts dojo is a cultural relic, but one which is very much needed today. As modern people, we can seek satisfaction in ways that were impossible for most people throughout human history. But because of the way our modern life is arranged, we are, at the same time, deprived of many of the good things people long ago took for granted. One is that we have lost the opportunity to share life with a group of people whose experiences, joys and struggles are also ours.

Most of our relationships to others in modern life are with fragments of people, or with representations of people. Life in community with whole people, in the flesh, day in day out, whose lives and feelings matter to us, is something rare to encounter. Yet it is indispensable to a feeling of wholeness and fulfillment. The alternative is alienation, depression, anxiety - all the ills the modern world tries to medicate away. We can cure them through sincere, ongoing dojo practice.

At the gas station, supermarket checkout, at school, on the road, in the store, at the dentist, the government office, the police department, at school, or work, most of the people we deal with remain strangers to us. We know them only as their functions. We do not see them in other aspects of their lives.

Because of this separation, people treat each other badly. If we live in a big city, commute to work in traffic or hurry along crowded streets, we think of other people as nuisances. That doesn't just hurt the people we are rude to on our busy way. It hurts us, by creating in us a feeling of loneliness and separation.

There are very few communities in the modern world in which people can live lives that are strong, meaningful, complete and shared, from generation to generation. For the people I practiced with, our traditional karate dojo was a good way to recover our humanity from the alienation and agitation built into modern fragmented relationships.

Do versus Jutsu

After the civil war period in medieval Japan, when the clashes of samurai and conquests of castles subsided, an era of consolidation of power followed. The samurai, the warrior class that won the battles, now ruled the empire. The martial skills that had brought them to power now needed to be supplemented by skills that would enable them to manage and shape their culture.

The process of cultural change through which an ancient warrior class became a modern ruling class continued for centuries: through the sudden modernization in the mid 19th century when the vestiges of samurai culture were outlawed, and in the post imperial, post WWII era, when the practice of military culture, including many practical martial arts, was discouraged.

Martial artists throughout this long period continued to train and at the same time to adapt their martial practice to accommodate the changing conditions around them. Some martial arts redefined themselves to remain relevant in a time without battle, and later, in a time when guns and planes replaced swords and arrows. Because there was something noble and beautiful and strong in martial skill that they were not willing to give up.

This cultural adaptation is the source of the martial arts with the suffixes -Do and -Jutsu. And for martial artists today, the designation is very meaningful, as it goes to the heart of what they do and why they do it.

The Japanese word Do is from the Chinese word Tao, often translated as Way. Like the English word, it means a way as in a path, a path through life or a path to enlightenment. Or it can mean the way, as in the way things exist.

Jutsu means skill or technique.

For centuries, Japanese culture made art and spiritual practice from familiar activities. Making tea, putting cut flowers in a vase. These and other ordinary activities became means of inner transformation, and aesthetic expressions of inner conditions.

The idea that through refinement of skill in an art or a craft a person would undergo an inner refinement as well, was an accepted part of cultural lore and life. Tea ceremony, ikebana, and haiku are examples of this.

As the battlefield application of martial skills waned, practitioners turned their attention to the refinement of their arts and the refinement of their character. Instead of martial skills being a means to conquest in battle, their demands were applied to the conquest of personal limits.

It was in this process that -jutsu became -do. Jujutsu, the samurai grappling techniques

used in close combat, became the sport of Judo in the late 19th century.

Kenjutsu, old style sword fighting skills, became the modern martial art of kendo. Kyujutsu, battlefield archery, became the stylized, Zen inflected Kyudo. Aikijutsu morphed into Aikido, as the purpose of these arts shifted.

Okinawan karate, the empty hand defense systems used by sailors and the military on the island for centuries, became Karatedo when these styles were imported to the colleges on mainland Japan in the 1920's.

The renaming of arts from -Jutsu to -Do is not a one way street. There is now a movement to change the -Do back to -Jutsu.

The Tokyo police have always called their method of subject-control and arrest 'Taiho Jutsu.' They do not learn it for inner transformation. They learn it as a practical means of arresting a resisting subject.

And yet it was a Tokyo Police officer, well-trained Taiho Jutsu, who was a great champion in Kendo. This is not a coincidence.

In the modern world – in the US, Europe and in Asia – there is some feeling that the -Do schools have lost their edge. Separated by generations from the practical application of their arts, the emphasis on inner transformation has deleted the urgency and danger that produced the deep transformation in the old school warriors in the first place.

For these modern practitioners, -Jutsu has more legitimacy and seriousness than the watered down and softened -Do arts. For the -Do practitioners, there is a depth of seriousness and purpose in their arts that is overlooked in the -Jutsu oriented systems.

If you work hard to master your skills, your character will develop too. If it doesn't, you will get resistance from the people around you; your own body and mind will throw obstacles in your way. You can't skip technique and somehow expect to develop inwardly. You won't.

The distinction between -Do and -Jutsu is one of perspective. If you train urgently, master your skills to fulfill your purpose you will experience deep transformation. Protecting the innocent from harm and mastering your body and mind are not two different things. You can label your practice a Do or a Jutsu, or you could say you are practicing sincerely.

The Aim of Practice

Kobun Chino could split a blade of grass at 25 yards. His students had seen him do it many times.

He and one of his students were driving along the Pacific Coast Highway one day in the spring. He pulled the car over to the side of the road, opened the trunk, and pulled out a 6-foot long Japanese bow and a quiver of hand carved arrows.

They walked across the road to the cliff overlooking the surging surf and the infinite Pacific stretching to the horizon. Had he looked up, the student would have seen the equally infinite blue and cloudless Pacific sky, but his gaze was fixed on the hands of his teacher, masterfully nocking the arrow onto the bow string and, with a subtle intake of breath, drawing the string back to its limit, his own arms and back a part of the bow, his focus as razor sharp as the head of the arrow.

The world froze for a moment, and then over the sound of the surf came the sound of the arrow released, the matsu kaze, the pine wind, as the bow string returned to rest.

The arrow flew in a high, gigantic arc out over the ocean.

Kobun Chino was a Zen monk. He taught at a small Zen practice center down the Peninsula from the San Francisco Zen Center. He had been invited to come to the US from Japan by Suzuki Roshi who started and led the San Francisco center. But Kobun decided against becoming involved with a large institution. He wanted to live a simple life and sit in meditation. It was at his small village Zendo that Suzuki Roshi came and spoke each Wednesday evening for a while in the late 60's. The talks he gave there later were published under the title "Zen Mind Beginner's Mind," one of the most influential books in the early years of the American Zen movement.

The arrow disappeared for a moment before the student's eyes, against the brilliance of the California sky. It reappeared, a dash against the blue, hovered, and began its long descent, gracefully disappearing into the water.

Then the men returned the bow and the empty quiver to the trunk of their car and drove away.

Had a stranger or a beginner seen this young Japanese monk shoot arrows into the sea, he may have believed that the man was wasting arrows. But this student had seen Kobun split a blade of grass at 25 yards. This student knew Kobun as a light-hearted, but profoundly serious man. And both knew that teachers teach. Even if they do not share a common spoken language, students and teachers do share their human life. And their close karmic connection can sometimes bridge the divide between lives better than any

spoken language.

What did Kobun teach that day?

Could we say this was a koan that Kobun presented his student? A koan is literally a public case, an event reported and put up for public scrutiny and consideration. In the Chinese legal tradition, it was a term used to refer to a legal precedent, used for public consideration of a question of law.

In the Zen tradition, a koan is a public case on the subject of enlightenment, on the subject of the nature of reality. They are used not as a matter of metaphysical speculation. In Buddhism it is made clear that direct insight into the nature of reality is the only way we can be free, permanently and completely, from suffering.

Was he saying “Only this moment”? Was he saying to his student, a dedicated practitioner: “Be concerned only with the method, not the target”?

Or was he saying that, in practice as in life, there is no stationary target. That no matter how perfect our aim, our karma’s trajectory goes into the infinite, our life’s trajectory goes into the infinite; that what we have is only the point on the path we are on right now; the only action we can take is the action we take right now. That once our lives begin, we go. Once we act, think or speak, our actions or our words take us directly, unimpeded, into the heart of vast reality, and we cannot get them back?

Was he saying, “It’s fun to shoot arrows into the sky and the ocean”?

I don’t know what he had in mind. Or what the student got from it. But if you are going to teach with allusions and gestures instead of ideas and action then you better have your motivation and your means clear, and understand your target perfectly. Because people can take it wrong. They can take confusion for depth and mystification for truth and language for nothing. And then they will be harmed. Because the target matters. And a turtle might be rising to the surface while you make your point.

Maybe he was one of the rare few who could teach so scrupulously. I hope his student understood. I know students loved him and miss him.

About thirty years later Chino dove into the water himself. To rescue his five year old daughter from drowning while she was swimming on a family vacation. His heart must have been full of love when he left the world, with her, that day.

Resilient Arts & Resilient People

The presumption that there is a fixed curriculum of technique which is known completely by the advanced teachers and which has been transmitted to them as a fully formed system from past teachers, and which is now being presented to a new generation of practitioners, is a fiction.

It is a useful fiction, in that it does give coherence to the way material is introduced to students in their first few years of practice. It gives them faith that the curriculum they are learning is something genuine, with value, as judged by people with the knowledge and experience to judge these things.

Beginners cannot judge the quality of a martial arts curriculum. So they rely on claims of legitimacy based on lineage and on the confidence of the teacher they are seeing first hand.

Because they start that way, and then invest their time and energy in that art, they become partisans of that school, of that master, that lineage. After all, if that master is great, they are smart to follow him. If he isn't, it casts doubt on their own achievements. As a result some martial arts people become fanatical advocates of their style and lose the ability to judge it honestly. If all their information comes from within that school's small stream of knowledge, they never get a broader view which they use to can evaluate it.

In science, there are peer-reviewed journals. Scientists doing research in their area of expertise submit their discoveries in the form of papers to a panel of experts in their field. Experts vet the material. If it is legitimate, they approve it for publication, so all the scientists who might make use of it have access to it. To the degree that the system works, cranks and dilettantes are kept out of the journals, and scientific knowledge progresses.

Certainly there are disputes and egos and opposing parties. But as a whole, the system works, because there is a fluid access to information. Insights are tested and shared and can be used as part of a collective enterprise to further human knowledge.

Martial arts need to have this kind of openness and rigor to be useful. If you are in a school that discourages this, then you ought to set out on your own path of discovery.

Here are the elements required to create a genuine approach to martial arts:

1. Learn the fundamentals in a genuine style. Master the katas, even if your understanding is incomplete. Allow the kata to teach you. As you move, your body will find ways to become more efficient, faster, more effective.

Get advanced information from a wide variety of sources – in striking and kicking, body

shifting and mechanics, energy transfer, vulnerable points, seizing and grappling, in groundfighting, tactical thinking, in strengthening your will to win, in conditioning your body and mind, and to develop toughness, resilience and intelligence.

2. Apply those lessons to every move of your kata. Use the kata as a template for discovery, and find as many applications as you can for every move. Allow your broad knowledge to illuminate your kata, and use the kata to bring your knowledge and ability into a coherent, practical system.

3. Partner practice. Get your hands on your training partners and challenge each other. Test everything. See what works. What fails. Find out why. Don't dismiss what is difficult just because it is difficult. Set it aside if you can't use it, but check it again and again until its secrets open up. They will.

When I first started learning karate, people gave nonsensical interpretations of moves, saying that the naihanchi katas have no interpretations, saying that stances like kosa dachi or nekkoashi dachi were useless in practical application. All of those assertions I once heard presented with great confidence have now been proven false. We have learned to use those stances and katas now as powerful tools for defense. But it takes a willingness to persist, to accept not-knowing for a while, to make your discoveries.

4. Street experience. The reciprocation between police experience and dojo experience is indispensable. You cannot do genuine modern martial arts practice without access to practical street experience. And you cannot get good street-worthy skills without consistent practice.

All the students in a dojo can benefit from the practical experience of a few cops in the group. But any dojo that lacks this dimension runs the risk of relying on imagination rather than real experience.

I once heard a person say, "At my level I feel comfortable handling three unarmed or two armed attackers."

No one with street experience would ever presume such a thing. That attitude is a result of training only in the controlled environment of the dojo and never working on the street. This misunderstanding is dangerous to anyone gullible enough to believe it.

The opposite error also arises: there are people who do work on the street who believe that under pressure they will spontaneously rise to the challenge. Without consistent training, the most talented fighter will perform at a level far below what they could achieve with training. That may be enough sometimes. But it may not.

5. Continue to question and explore as you remain consistent in the practice of kata.

6. Train hard. Most people who consider themselves modern martial artists train two or

three hours a week. That is good enough to get a workout, and to get some decent skills. If that is all the time you have, enjoy it.

But if you want to achieve your potential, then you will need to practice a few hours a day. No musician, no carpenter, no pilot would call themselves a professional if they practiced two hours a week and then took a month or two off a few times a year.

Practice diligently for a few hours every day. Stay receptive to fresh knowledge and perspectives. Give it a decade or two. You'll be the real thing. You won't have to invent a story about an old master from somewhere else to give credibility to what you do. You will be that master.

Obstacles & Good Fortune

At every level of martial arts training, we will encounter obstacles. If we treat them as outside the scope of our training, something to avoid or get rid of so we can get back to training, we will be defeated by them. If we make them part of our training, we can triumph and move on.

At a mountain pass where the road narrows, we see a single warrior make his stand against what seems to be an endless series of enemies.

One by one, they come to challenge him. One by one, they are defeated. If the hero were to face them all at once, he would succumb to their massed power. By taking them on one by one, the hero becomes the victor.

But if he loses even one battle, he loses everything. The opponents are numerous and relentless. The hero fights alone.

This is how our training goes.

As beginners, we face many unfamiliar opponents. Our feeling of awkwardness in a room filled with skillful people. Not knowing the techniques, the movement sequences, the formal etiquette of the training hall. All of this can be intimidating. In fact, it can be so intimidating, that it defeats some beginners. They never defeat this first opponent.

We will face sore muscles. Injury. A change in schedule. Work pressures. Personal pressures. Health, family, money. Events inside the dojo and out, in our body and mind, all will come to the fore, one by one or several at a time, and appear as obstructions to our training. We need to persist in the face of these obstacles. They are not separate from our training. They are the substance of our training.

Someone may believe that their legs are not strong enough for martial arts. They may decide they do not have the speed or flexibility it takes to be effective or excel at their art. If they yield to these doubts, they give up the possibility of achieving anything. But if they train sincerely and consistently, they will prevail.

People discover resources of physical ability they never knew they had. They become stronger. They become more flexible. Their balance and speed improve. By consistently practicing, they can overcome the opponent of doubt.

But like the hero battling the series of enemies on the bridge alone, another opponent will appear when one is defeated. Perhaps the desire for a higher level of performance. Maybe a challenge to the ego. Maybe an uneasy feeling that other people are having an easier time. You feel too young. Too old. Too thin. Too fat. Too different. Too much the same. Maybe you feel your own achievements are going unrecognized, despite your merit.

These all will appear as obstacles to training. For a while, they will appear as inherent qualities of martial arts practice, rather than something which will be encountered and defeated, or simply outgrown. This mistaken belief makes some people give up training.

There will be more opponents ahead. At all stages of one's martial arts career, the heart of practice is a series of challenges. If your dojo environment is a healthy one, these challenges will make you strong.

Facing each new opponent as it appears does not mean creating a life that is an endless series of battles. It means creating a life in which we are not intimidated by difficulty, in which we consistently accept the challenges we face on the path we have chosen.

That way martial arts practice stays fruitful and meaningful. It does not turn into a corny pursuit of rank or approval. In this way martial arts can be a way of life.

Every Person Can Be Great

Even within a few months of starting training, you feel different. You feel good. Your friends and family notice the change. It happens to everybody.

Now, if you put a three-year practitioner next to a ten-year practitioner, you can tell the difference in skill and demeanor. But not all of the difference between them is visible. And since they weren't identical when they started, the results of all their hard work are not obvious if you compare them.

What we would really want to do is compare people as they are now, after years of training, to how they were five or ten years before, or how they would be now without any training at all.

Not too possible. So how do you assess the long-term effect of training? How do I tell the college student what her karate is all about after all these years, when the savor of daily dojo practice, the novelty of martial arts as an interesting toy, is gone? What replaces it?

She is fit, fast, powerful, skilled. Her mind is sharp and clear. She takes those things for granted, as if they were part of her constitution, inherently in her make-up, as if these qualities were not the temporary and conditional result of her training all these years.

Beginners experience their practice as an "object-with-characteristics," that is, something separate from themselves that they are acquiring. Beginners experience practice as something that is separate from them. They use it to hone their skills, tone their bodies, sharpen their minds; to feel how they want to feel.

For people who continue to train, their practice of karate, which earlier on seemed to be an object-with-characteristics, turns into, after all those years of effort and increasing mastery, not something separate from them, and not just a part of them, either. It *is* them.

What do I say to the 50 year old who cannot or doesn't feel good doing the grappling techniques because his joints are stiff and resistant? What do I say that is good for all of them, including the inspired ones, the delighted ones, the great athletes, the entire spectrum of abilities and range of personalities and experiences that would help them all, not discourage any or elevate any in a false way?

Should I tell the older students they are old, their bodies are not as strong as they once were, and they should just accept it and do less? Is it enough to tell the young, strong ones that they must work harder to make the most of their time?

All of us will be old and young. We will experience all kinds of days in practice.

When we enter the dojo for training each day, all of us, regardless of rank or age, come in

a little faded and foggy. We have been at work or school all day, and we are bringing in with us all the disturbances and distractions that have been accumulating throughout our busy, jangled modern day.

After training, we feel fresher. We sense that a kind of cleanness has come over us. We feel transformed, with our bodies alive and our senses more acute and our minds more settled and clear. The experience of training is more like shedding a skin than accumulating something. It is more like being reborn in the heat and pressure of training, than something to be measured in terms of gain and loss.

Competition is a good thing. But it cannot be the only thing. Being the best in the Olympic sense may be a worthy aspiration for some people sometimes, but it is harmful to most people if it becomes the model for our lives.

All people can benefit from participating in sports, not just for the purpose of being the best or being great, but as an expression of our human vitality and our shared life. All people can enjoy singing. But now, with fine recorded music available to everyone, people have become ashamed to sing in public, because they are not such good singers. Should we give up on everything because there are a few individuals with virtuoso abilities in a single area which makes us feel lesser in comparison? Should we not pray because there is a virtuoso prayer out there?

The Olympic spirit — in sports, arts, culture, and so on — can suppress the human spirit as much as inspire it. Each of us can fulfill our own potential, majestically, as human beings. There is no limit to how many great people can be in the world at the same time.

As real practitioners, training day in and day out, for years, decades, a lifetime, we will strive diligently. We do not need to concern ourselves too much with gain and loss. We simply shed the skin of the past, and so through training become refreshed and reborn in the daily immediacy of our own life.

A Day's Work

Some people who joined our dojo never expected to join. One guy used to bring his kids in on Saturdays. Their mom brought them during the week, but on the weekends, on Saturday mornings, it was Dad's turn. He was a big guy. The kind you notice as being big, with a chest and forehead like a bull. Like he was bench-pressing minivans for his workout. He started out thinking karate was a nice kid activity. He thought it was good for his boys, because they didn't have a way to toughen up like he had when he was a kid.

He grew up on a farm a few miles from the dojo. His family had some of the best farmland in the valley, on the bank of the Connecticut River. Most of the farmers in the valley at that time were recently arrived immigrants, grandparents and great grandparents of the people whose kids are growing up today.

As he tells it, in those days everybody worked, all the time. There was always a job to do, and everyone was expected to pitch in. So when he was 10 or 11 years old, he did the simple, hard, repetitive tasks that come with farm life. When he was sent to the barn to cut the tops off of the carrots, this was not, as he puts it, like getting a bunch of them ready for soup. This was a vast heap of carrots, a mountain of them to a ten-year-old, a harvest's worth, which filled the stalls of the barn to overflowing. He pulled up a stool. Picked up a knife. And started cutting. Throw the tops into an empty stall nearby and the put the cut carrots into another pile. And cut. And throw. Cut. Throw. All day. Till it was done. His whole family worked from morning to night, he says, and they were strong.

When a goat ran off or a stump needed to be pulled from a field, his father just told him to do it. These were considered good jobs for a kid. When he screwed up the penalty was: labor. There was always something to do.

For him, growing up, effort and boredom were always combined, and always present.

He did not want to do this all his life, he said to himself. There's got to be something better to do than farming. This was around the same time that the Commonwealth of Massachusetts took that farm away from his family. It was a successful farm. It provided a livelihood and a home for his family, and had for a generation. But the highway was coming through. The state took the farm. Eminent domain. For the general good. And they didn't pay what it was worth. And yet this man's family had worked it so hard; it was theirs.

But there was nothing they could do to stop it. The farmers were helpless. The lawyers held all the power. Everything was up to the lawyers. This was about the time when his family told him: You be a lawyer.

How one would go about this, he had no idea. But he was determined to do it. So he applied the ethos that had once gotten him through farm work to get through law school. He said it made law school seem pleasant by comparison.

One day he brought his children to the dojo. Growing up in suburban comfort, they didn't have work to do every day. They had activities. And he watched them practice karate, sitting on the bench at the side of the room with the other parents. For some parents, it was the only break they would get that day. Some read. Some took off and jogged for 45 minutes. He thought he would like to try karate. It seemed absurd at first. He didn't feel any need for self-defense training. He hadn't met anyone (other than the male members of his own family) he couldn't snap like a dry twig. But there was something great about it. Something familiar and something missing from his life.

For a lawyer, he said, the day never ends. You just stop. But the feeling of getting the job done, the satisfaction of having the truck loaded, the season over, being exhausted, being done for the day, never happens. In karate it does. You go home exhausted and come back ready. There's a pulse. And you can be tough, as aggressive as you want, and you don't have to go to jail when you're done. And you don't have to make a big deal out of it. No badges, no awards, no nothing. Just the satisfaction of knowing that the job, the training period, is done.

A lot of the farm work that, a generation ago, was done by farm kids, today is done by migrant workers. The kids who grew up on those farms, by choice or circumstance, now have no farms to put their effort into. Half a dozen of the black belt instructors in the school grew up on farms in the Valley.

Physical strength, determination in the face of difficulty or pain, inner stability, are qualities they all have. Those qualities are what they have used to succeed in their own karate practice, what they taught to the other dojo members in their classes, and what works for them in life. It doesn't take values imported from Asia to make practice valuable, successful, or genuine.

Our mental habits, the values we inherit, propel us, even though the form they take may be totally unexpected.

An emergency room can offer an opportunity to help people in crisis. It can also seem like drudgery or a siege. The river of suffering is never-ending. But for some ER doctors, like anyone who is obliged to help each day, their own pain can from time to time eclipse that of the people who come to them in need. This was explained to me.

That this is a function of mind, not outer circumstance, is not obvious. Tell a high school teacher with an out of control class, or a heartbroken lover, that their suffering is a function of their state of mind and, in the midst of difficulty, it will be too hard for them to grasp. If they do nothing, they will probably keep suffering. However, if they take action, in the right way, they will start to see some light.

A member of the dojo sees 40 patients a day in the emergency room of a city hospital. A few he can help. Many people who come to his emergency room come not because they

are facing a life-threatening emergency, but because they are upset. Almost every day some woman arrives by ambulance having faked a fainting spell during a fight with a boyfriend. People come in with constipation and demand a CAT scan. People come in sad or frustrated or lonely and make hysterical demands. Knowing that this is a symptom of their helplessness does not make it any easier for him to deal with. Because people curse at him when he refuses unnecessary treatments or tests. It became a personal struggle. His level of anxiety became intolerable.

After years of this, conflict became his mode of operation not just with patients, but with staff and administrators. Everyone wanted something from him, but few seemed to appreciate what he was doing for them or their families.

He joined the dojo. He was angry. It showed in his kata. Because each person is practicing the same sequence of movements, it is easy to spot the subtle variations that reveal the inner life of each person. If someone is lax or tense, impulsive or shy, aggressive or timid, guarded or open, phony or honest, happy or sad, lazy, courageous, angry, or greedy, it will be immediately visible in their kata. If they persevere, the kata will have a tonic effect on their body and emotions, an effect that goes deeper and deeper the longer they practice. This ER doctor trained hard at the dojo every day.

The pressure to move well, to meet the demands of training, demands made by your body, your instructor, your opponent or training partners, changes you. Your own effort to learn what to do and to do it well—to gain speed, strength and skill, and to eliminate the gap between your intention and your action—makes you stronger and humbler at once.

What's there to prove, if you've really got the goods? Nothing. You can relax. You won't hold excess tension in your body after a hard workout. The tension drops away. And the relaxation that naturally results feels good.

He experienced this. He returned to the dojo day after day and worked out hard again. That pulse began to regulate his body and mind so he could relax, and push hard, and relax again.

What impressed him, even before he had learned much karate, was that in the dojo he worked with people who were all trying to do their best. That came as a relief. Although each person, individually, may have been strong or weak, a great athlete or a desk jockey, as a group they were all moving forward, focused not on aches and pains and obstacles, but on being free of them. In the dojo, he had found people who realized that aches and pains were part of daily life. People who respected each other and themselves. Who did not presume that someone else ought to do things for them, but who were willing to do for themselves and for others, any time. The restraint the senior members showed in placing demands on the newer members made it possible for each person to learn easily and help generously where it was really needed. No one in need was ignored. No one presumed upon the generosity of the stronger individuals.

Here was a model he could apply to the emergency room. Even if he could not change his working environment, he had found a way to change the way he dealt with it. And he had the composure he needed to implement the model. Be cool. Be rational. Be respectful. Talk to people. See where they are coming from. Now, when the man who slashes his abdomen open once every month or so and stuffs lifesavers, utensils, tools, and pamphlets into the wound, comes in to the emergency room for treatment, he just takes care of the guy as best he can.

When he wades into the river of suffering that never stops, the suffering that appears to be self-inflicted, which once appeared to be an assault on society, a waste and abuse of the hospital's resources, now appears differently to him. When people arrive in pain or crazy, begging for a witness to their misery and confusion, he does what he can do.

Cultivation of Gratitude

We live in a world that is over-stimulated. That is, our senses are continually disturbed by our environment, and our heart and mind are continually disturbed by our desires. We learn to be continually disturbed. One of the disturbances to which we succumb is a perpetual dissatisfaction with our current circumstance. This is a pervasive human malady. It can be overcome, and it should be, because it makes us always unhappy and it makes us bother the people around us and degrade the natural environment around us.

The chief antidote to this perpetual dissatisfaction is not working harder, protesting, reducing carbon footprint, becoming more insistent upon our victim status, making other people suffer more, gaining more power or status, or having more sexual activities – or any of the usual methods we employ to try and end our disturbance.

The chief antidote to perpetual dissatisfaction is gratitude.

Gratitude is rarely taught or encouraged. But it has three transformative effects. First, it makes us appreciate what we have, so we can be happy here and now. Second, it stops us from doing non-virtuous actions to make ourselves happy – an approach that inevitably leaves us exhausted and envious and always wanting more. Third, it brings us into the present moment. This ontological transformation, produced by the sincere and continual practice of gratitude, has a deep transformative effect and can lead us toward enlightenment.

The past and the future do not exist. They are fantasy lands concocted by our minds, in which we store our desires, regrets, fears and other negative mental states. The past and the future have no other content. To the degree that we live in turmoil – filled with grievances, anger, desire, jealousy and so on, we neglect what is possible now. Instead of engaging in virtuous action in the present, we are carried away by ignorance and non-virtue. In this way we miss our entire lives. We cultivate a habit of looking toward the next stage, never really mastering — or enjoying — this one. It is wasteful, and it causes us to lose the opportunity this precious human life offers us to be kind, strong and decent, to take care of the people who may need us, and to build something of lasting value for all time through our virtuous acts in the present moment.

This is why it is useful to consider the blessings and good opportunities we presently enjoy. A healthy body, a clear mind, good friends and family to share our lives, time to do good things, freedom of action, are all blessings which we can enjoy ourselves and which we can put at the service of others.

Therefore, it is practical to cultivate gratitude, appreciate what we have, and not squander this brief chance for happiness.

Giving Back

In Massachusetts, if you do not return your library books, you can go to jail. (Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 266 sections 99a and 100.)

A wide variety of personal choices is tolerated and even encouraged by the Commonwealth. But clinging to your library books past their due date is not one of them. You may have forgotten. You may have become accustomed to their presence on your shelves. You may be busy or lazy or possessive or forgetful, but the harder you hold on to them, the more vigorously they will be removed from your grasp.

Most people let go of their books in plenty of time. Willingly bringing them back so other people can enjoy the books, we can avoid the fines and the tart librarian.

And why hang on to them, anyway? They take up space, we already read them, and if civic virtue and social sanction aren't motivation enough, there is always the bedrock of self interest.

Which is a good dharma lesson for us, because everything we have — whether James Patterson, Shakespeare, Milton or the Bible — it's going to come due, and it's going to be returned.

Everything we have is borrowed. Whether we love it or loathe it, protect it or neglect it, we will be separated from it sooner or later.

Our bodies will be returned. We slipped through a narrow opening into life, and we may walk upon the earth proud and powerful, but no matter what we think along the way, that body will slip back through another portal, briefly opened, into death. Someone else will borrow it. It will be food, molecules, memories for others.

Our clothes, our house, our car, our tools, our friends and family, our rank and position, our achievements and regrets, all the scripts that form the volumes of our life, will be returned. They are on loan to us, and no matter how accustomed to their presence we are, they are not ours.

This process of separation is a source of unimaginable suffering if we are not prepared. This suffering is commonplace. But it is not inevitable. The way to avoid it is offered to us through practice. The tighter we cling to the components of our lives, the more we hold to the mistake of their permanence, the more we suffer.

The more we are accustomed to practice, to behaving decently toward ourselves and others, to developing a calm, clear mind that does not project or linger, the more we cultivate the wisdom to see the fundamental dharma teaching that all things that have been assembled from parts – our bodies, our minds, our lives – will eventually be disassembled, the more suffering will cease and an opportunity to achieve great things

will arise in its place.

So we can borrow our wonderful or terrible stories. We can read them, explore them, learn from them, live them out, take care of them, ignore them or revile them. We can make them our own for a while. But eventually, we will have to return them. And if we do not do so willingly, with wisdom, they – and we – will be taken away by force.

The monk meditating at midnight, with nothing to his name but a robe, a bowl and the moonlight, is an image we might view with sentimental yearning, like a lifestyle piece in *Real Simple* magazine. Or we might see it as unimaginably impoverished — a life defined by deficiency — a life without a sweetheart, the internet, friends, stuff to do, or a cool job.

There is another way to see it. That monk is not so different from those of us who live our lives in other ways. Only he is focused on doing the work he needs to do – not by neglecting the important things of this life, but by putting them in context of eternity, where everything will be returned, and our choice is not between pastimes or genres, but between imprisonment or freedom.

Christian Dharma

In times of peace and prosperity, people turn away from inner life and pursue the things of this world. It happened in Rome and Greece, Alexandria and Assyria, Babylon, New York, London, Paris, Munich, and it was the same cycle every time. People partied and hustled and prosperity declined, and as access to pleasure was withdrawn, they suffered. Some turned to violence. Some to superstition. Some to despair. And some turned to the inner wisdom that has been handed down from generation to generation for millennia, that offers the means to put an end to suffering, to find honor and dignity, redemption and value in human life and life as we pass beyond death.

That is the place of spiritual life.

Now sophisticated people find the idea quaint, but religion was devised out of necessity. And like farming, like navigating across the ocean by examining the night sky and the ripples on the water's surface, spiritual knowledge does not record well. It needs to be lived, modeled and taught from generation to generation – in the company of people who value the knowledge, live it and take their custody of it seriously.

There is a page that western Buddhists can take from early American Christians and their descendants practicing fervent Christianity today. The page is well represented in a shape-note hymn from centuries ago which contains many essential Buddhist teachings and more, a means to understand and use them, helping to orient us in the vast ocean of experience, and helping us traverse that sea with skill.

As you read the words, take note of the natural sense these singers have of the pervasive condition of suffering as fundamental to life. These singers assume this to be as true as any Asian Buddhist – they did not have the misfortune of being deceived by a few generations of golden calf worship. They knew hardship and want all their lives.

And they did not complain about it. They did not hate life, protest, expect someone else to rectify this condition – they were inspired. They recognized, as Buddhism teaches, that suffering is one of the qualities of all dharmas, that it is the nature of this life.

Notice the singers' graceful and intimate understanding not only of the Buddha's first noble truth (the truth of suffering,) but of a well-developed non-attachment to that which has no self-nature.

What after all is vain about this world? The singers seem to know something the empire builders, titans, moguls, hacks, and hustlers all have missed. That there is no lasting satisfaction in holding on to things. They disappear. Buildings and monuments, books and movies cease to provide lasting satisfaction. Like the folly of Ozymandias lying in pieces in the desert sand, or an aging star staring at herself across the vanity table by candle light, or anyone anywhere anytime: our time, our life, our achievements will

vanish without a trace. That is the vain world referred to in the song.

But this world, this realm of desire, suffering and vanity, (samsara as it is known in Buddhist teaching,) is not my home, the singers say. Just as sentient beings take rebirths in every condition imaginable as they cycle through the six realms of existence until they find ultimate refuge in their own Buddhahood, so these singers know that their suffering too is impermanent, and that ultimately they will return home. To peace. To a warm and loving welcome. To a place they belong and where they will feel at home.

A place they will travel in company — with their friends and family, like minded members of their community (called the sangha in Buddhism) with whom they share the trials and difficulties of life, the path ahead, and with whom they will ultimately pass through the gates of peace and joy and ease (nirvana as it is known in Buddhism.) They use the term “Christians” in this sense. It is the name of their community.

They honor the virtue of non-attachment, because they know that to be attached to impermanent and meaningless things, things that arise out of desire, things of this world, is a mistake, is a result of ignorance, is the cause of suffering. (The second noble truth, in Buddhist terms.)

And that beautiful world, that true home, like the Dharmakaya (the all-pervading truth-body of the Buddha), is not far away. For those who can see, it's right here. For some, it is right down the road from here, or right up that hill, or just beyond that cloud-covered peak, yonder, you can just about see it.

And to sing praises is the insight of someone in ecstatic union who reported back and described something of the experience in a way like the blissful endless sounds of Buddha words shared by the community of Bodhisattvas in the Sambogakaya.

The place we will all be someday. Taking rebirth in a place they are calling the New Jerusalem, the holy city. A place beyond time, where every sound is bliss and every sight is magnificent and every act is virtuous and every person joyful and filled with boundless love for everyone they meet.

Want to go?

Farewell, vain world! I'm going home!
My savior smiles and bids me come,
And I don't care to stay here long!

Sweet angels beckon me away,
To sing God's praise in endless day,
And I don't care to stay here long!
(Chorus:)

Right up yonder, Christians, away up yonder,
O, yes my Lord, for I don't care to stay here long.
I'm glad that I am born to die,
From grief and woe my soul shall fly,
And I don't care to stay here long!

Bright angels shall convey me home,
Away to New Jerusalem,
And I don't care to stay here long!

(Chorus)

Right up yonder, Christians, away up yonder,
O, yes my Lord, for I don't care to stay here long.

(Chorus)

Right up yonder, Christians, away up yonder,
O, yes my Lord, for I don't care to stay here long.

Battle and the Ocean of Mind

Fish can sense light. They can sense temperature and turbulence. They can see and hear well enough to recognize their prey, and to escape their predators. But they never get to know water. Water is the context for everything they do and perceive. But it itself is imperceptible to them. They are never not in it.

We are like that. There is a critical missing link in our training. We exist in a universe of mind. Noticing it is critical. It will determine the quality of our training and the quality of our life and death.

In training, we rehearse conflict scenarios again and again until they root deeply, until they are reflexive. Because we have been through it a thousand times in simulation, when conflict arises we can act spontaneously; we execute the procedure ingrained in training.

As we ramp our training up to meet the intensity of the demands of conflict, it becomes tempting to regard all unknowns as potential enemies. In a war zone, it is prudent. In peacetime, it is dangerous. If we lose the flexibility to scale from kinship to threat, we lose our way. In some cases, it may become our duty to do it. But if we do it ignorantly, it may defeat our purpose as martial artists.

We exist in an ocean of mind. If we allow our practice to be fueled by fear and rage, we degrade to the level of the enemy. Our true enemy, the poisonous states of mind that cause suffering. It is tempting to do it. It feels energizing. But the energy that is a product of fear and hate will be subtracted from a whole world of potentially good human relationships. If we lose perspective in this way, we sacrifice our human connection to the people we are dedicated to protect.

If we lose our commitment to virtuous action, we lose the source of our strength, and we squander the abilities we have developed. When we know what we do is right, we can be fearless and resourceful without limit. Friends will appear. For those who waste their minds in hate, the entire world will, by increments, be transformed into enemies. It may require an act of profound heroism to avoid becoming ensnared in anger.

If we fail to notice that our mind is creating the way we see our world, then we will get lost in procedure and forget our true mission. As martial artists, we have a critical social role as well as an individual opportunity. The context of our training must reinforce our dedication to our mission: generosity to those who need us; patience and dignity in the face of provocation unless and until the moment to act should come; personal conduct that is honorable; the cultivation of a calm, clear mind that allows us to see clearly.

In the heat of battle, it will be impossible to cultivate this. When the decisive moment comes, we must act; all considerations will fall away. But as we train, as we live our lives, whether we perceive it or not, we will cultivate not only our skills, but our heart and

mind as well. Whether we cultivate a heart and mind of hatred, or of nobility ,will decide the course of our life.

If we are motivated to do right and we act with courage, although there is no guarantee that we will win, we will never lose.

Beyond the Art of the Deal

Among the unintended consequences of modern commercial culture is the habit of turning human relationships into deals. We do it in the name of fairness. Fairness is better than unfairness. But it is a degraded basis for human relationships, and it doesn't work in a dojo.

If you have a marriage where each person insists on only doing 50 percent, the marriage will be unhappy. It's not my hour to baby sit, or, you didn't come up with your percentage of the electric bill. The bickering will be endless, and eventually the baby will be unwatched, and the lights will go out, and the effort spent on settling grievances will exhaust the couple. If each person is committed to doing 100 percent, then the marriage will be happy. Each person can totally rely on the other, no matter what. It's a wonderful feeling. But if one person is committed to the 100 percent, and the other to something less, then there will be exploitation and unhappiness. So what really works is everyone giving everything they can. That is the opposite of what we learn in the marketplace. In a store, in a deal, in a contract, in a negotiation, we seek to give the least and get the most. This may create an efficient distribution of scarce resources, but kindness and generosity are not scarce resources. It is possible to produce them endlessly.

Stinginess and mistrust cannot be carried over into dojo life, if the dojo is going to function as a place of liberation. Each person has to understand that by giving the most, they get the most. If we go all-out in our training, we get as strong as possible. If we hold back, we don't. If we seek out opportunities to help others learn, we benefit by having a chance to shift perspective, and by making the effort to analyze and convey the karate techniques properly, we gain deeper insight into them ourselves. We also build the habit of leading based on taking responsibility for the achievement of others. We will not get these benefits by being stingy with our time or energy or by remaining alone and unchallenged.

Money is important to people, so in my dojo we kept it very simple. No fundraising, no special fees, no founder's birthday donations, no seminars, no goods for sale, no extras, no shakedowns, no surprises. And not free. You paid your membership dues. There was no limit on what you got back. Because people paid something, they valued what they got. Usually, teachers of free community center, garage and basement classes quit teaching after a short time. It is good to be generous with your time and money. However, you will not be helping people if you exhaust yourself without appreciation and mutual support. If everyone pitches in, then everyone in the dojo has a forum in which to be generous and to work their hardest. Nobody feels cheated or taken advantage of.

We are so accustomed to giving the least and getting the most, so on guard against being taken advantage of, that we may also forget that commerce can be good. A free and fair exchange of value benefits both parties. If you have grain and need cloth, and you meet someone who has cloth and needs grain and you trade, it's good. If there is coercion,

greed or deception driving the exchange, it is not good.

The model for relationships in the dojo sometimes got people thinking about the other relationships in their lives. One dojo member felt he was being treated unfairly at work. He walked away from the job one day and the next week they called him, and hired him back for more pay.

One woman, a beginner, came to class and cried all the way through. She did every move well, never daydreamed or wobbled, but through the warm-ups, the basics, the kata practice, tears poured down. As she was leaving I said, "Hey, what's wrong?" She just shook her head. For the first time in her life, at home, when a slap was coming toward her, she backed up out of the way instead of freezing in place. That did it. All hell broke loose. She was out of there. Did karate practice give her that ability? Did being part of a group of strong people? She had joined only a month before because she wanted to be able to defend herself.

Little Pink Houses

In T'ang dynasty China, in the golden age of Ch'an Buddhism, a monk would typically describe himself as "a man of no rank." When we read this description now, it may sound like a quaint holdover from feudal society, when everyone, from peasant to Emperor, had an official rank.

It might seem like an irrelevancy to modern Buddhist practitioners. Especially for people practicing in the Japanese Zen tradition, where American and European teachers now own million dollar Zen Centers and require constant displays of personal deference by their followers; a tradition in which some of the patriarchs in Japan were supported by the military dictatorships of Shoguns and samurai, in which many Zen monks were, indeed, men of very high social rank.

So we do not immediately understand that the description — a man of no rank — was not just a pose. Sometimes contemporary scholars explain this phrase as sociological: in China in the ninth century, there were legions of men from poor families with no real hope of economic success, no likelihood, therefore, of marrying or establishing themselves as men of any status, and in this Marxist interpretation, as a result of their economic alienation they turned to monastic life — for material support, for social position, for something to do.

There may have been such people. But it is a misunderstanding of the significance of the phrase "man of no rank." And it prevents us from learning what our ancestors knew and what, through their words, they are trying to teach us.

Our relationships with others are permeated with an awareness of rank. No less than in a feudal society, and in a way, more so, because instead of having a fixed and titled social hierarchy, our status is undefined and requires frequent signaling. The pursuit of higher status, or the means to signal higher status, is a chief motivator of the behavior of modern people.

The size of houses, the choice of car, the school you went to or need to get into, what you do to get a job or a promotion, the restaurants people go to, where they are seated, who you know, where you travel, how you get there, the entertainment people choose, the events you attend, the tickets you buy, your clothes and your phone, your sports equipment, where you sit in the Zen center. All these concerns – and all the marketing that influences them – are bound to the impulse to signify one's status.

Status signaling may not be the only motivator – the pursuit of money, food, leisure, sex and the impulse to human kindness also may play a role – but in the modern world it is the most manipulated motivator.

In this respect, we are not different from the medieval people who were so concerned

with social rank.

In the practice of Buddhism we let go of it.

The Dalai Lama often says, "I am just a simple monk. All I own is my robe and bowl." He is serious about this. As sophisticated and skeptical modern people, who are lied to by marketers, actors and public figures of all types, and so fear being gullible that we maintain a stance of ironic disbelief even in the face of the truth, we might think that because he is a head of state, with a big place to live, followers, comforts and a plane, he is just striking a pose or quoting.

He is quite serious. And he reminds himself and his followers of this fact frequently. We might think this is an easy thing for him to say, because he actually has high status. But if it was so easy, the other high status people might say it, too. And we do not hear them say it.

What is easy, is to become accustomed to and eventually addicted to the attachments and props that cling to you when you are a person of high rank. And which are not really yours, but which will preoccupy you and distract you and intoxicate you, and which inevitably will be withdrawn, leaving pain far out of proportion to the pleasure they once provided.

The Dalai Lama knows this. He has trained himself to see it clearly and to bear it in mind. It is how he manages to keep his composure when his country is stolen, his people are killed, his heritage which is the light of the world is obliterated – all the while vigorously countering the forces of ignorance and destruction.

To practice dharma, we let go of all the stuff that clings to us, that preoccupies us, that distracts us, that taxes our power, wastes our life and forces us – with the false promise of pleasure and status – to lose our lives and miss the chance to put an end to suffering for ourselves and others forever.

Japanese Zen teacher Uchiyama Roshi described "opening the hand of thought" as his meditation technique. As a thought arises, we simply do not hold onto it. This may be a provisional technique, not a complete path to the end of suffering, as many have said. But whether or not it is, it is a necessary and brilliant way to create the habit of releasing our attachment to the stuff that clings to us and the stuff we learn to cling to as we move through life.

There are many old roads that wind through the forest around here. Some of them are barely visible tracks through the mountains. It looks like no one has walked them in a hundred years. They are like old memories. They seem to have no end. I walk along them. I think maybe every person who walked this road before has vanished from the earth. I cannot meet them face to face any more. But I can walk where they walked. I can walk the way they did, years ago.

It makes me think of a poem by Basho. Basho was a medieval Japanese poet who wrote haikus. There are a lot of fussy boring haikus in the world. And many fifth grade teachers ask their kiddies to write haikus, because haikus are short and most ten year olds can't write sonnets. But we would be wrong to dismiss the old Japanese haiku as a hyper-aesthetic tangent to true dharma.

Some will echo through time and space and mind so beautifully they may arise unbidden and unstoppable as we go. Basho wrote:

The autumn wind
Along this country road
Goes no one

How the Dragon Gets the Pearl

There is no reason to believe that if you sit still a lot, all your troubles will be cancelled. Buddhism doesn't say so. There is no reason to believe that if you try to put all of your thoughts aside, something wonderful will happen.

In many Zen centers and the places under their influence, this ignorance is dogma, and lucid analysis is ridiculed. The promoters of this kind of nonsense will tell you that they are practicing "a tradition beyond words," and that "the map is not the journey," and your limited ideas won't help you put an end to suffering.

But at the summit of Indian Buddhist philosophy, the culmination of a 1500 year process of insight into the words of the Buddha and the nature of reality (specifically, the Yogachara and the Madhyamika Prasangika, two great streams of thought which run together and which nourished the tradition that became Zen and Ch'an and Dzogchen) what we find points toward experience beyond words. This tradition uses lucid analysis, which respects the practitioner and employs the tools of language and cognition to reveal the limits of language and cognition and to move beyond them.

Practitioners in these traditions and other closely related lines of Buddhist teaching understood the need for deep stillness in order to permit the arising of the exquisite subtlety of perception required to observe the mind in action. They weren't just sitting there — being still, stopping thoughts, reducing stress or picturing water.

In modern Zen centers, teachers talk about the uselessness of thought. But you don't have to be a "Zen master" or even a Zen master to know the map is not the journey. Any AAA member or GPS owner can tell you that. And when these Zen masters are marketing their centers, buying buildings, applying for grants, or designing a fee structure, they seem not to question the efficacy of the linear discursive thought they deride in daily dharma talks.

They counter this observation by pointing out the fact that thought is necessary in the relative world, but that in the realm of the absolute, the true world, it is false and useless. They claim that the relative world — the Zen center, the members, the contributions, etc. — constitute a skillful means to further the teaching.

Yet every day, five times a day in many of these centers, they chant that samsara is nirvana, that form is emptiness and emptiness is form. That the relative is not hiding some absolute behind it, but that in fact, this relative world we experience as regular people is a pramana, a valid perception, and specifically, it is a valid perception that is our karma and the absolute and a co-dependent arising that is a perfect mirror of our mind, the mind of the Buddha.

Not a separate realm. Not another world. Not some glow or potentiality waiting out there somewhere to be discovered, or a little Buddha inside us obscured by ignorance,

but what is right here before our eyes, right now.

They chant, with the words of the Heart Sutra and the other Prajna Paramita sutras, the same words we find in the Madhyamika Karika, the same words we read in Nagarjuna's Wisdom, that reality does not hide, that there is one truth, as convenient as it may be from time to time, for us ordinary people to seek refuge in the conventions of the market.

If we can use logic and insight in our mind stream to buy property, build a building, recruit followers, accumulate donations and so on, then why can we not use logic to help ourselves to see how the mind functions, how language works to shift perception, to understand how seeing the suffering of endless beings can break your heart, and how this heartbreaking love becomes an irresistible motivation to get the tools we need to help take care of them and save them.

A pious pose, the right outfit, haircut, lofty affect, willful obscurity and meticulous ceremony won't help. There is no way to just sit still and expect something good will happen as a result. It is possible to sit and stay confused. Sit and dull your mind. Sit and deepen the distortions and prejudices you first sat down with. Sit and let your life pass.

To have a real teacher you can rely on as a guide is something of inestimable value. To join a club and hope for the best may not help.

Some koans which may once have been lucid arguments are now badly translated and incomprehensible. Once, expressed within their own cultural context, they may have been familiar ideas seen in a fresh perspective. They may have been quotes from scriptures which, it was assumed, the student had thoroughly studied, and which were suddenly revealed to have a depth and dimension that had been invisible before.

When the Diamond Sutra master featured in the Platform Sutra suddenly abandons his books for the purity of the direct perception of reality beyond words, his insight is utterly predicated upon his Buddhist scholastic education. That intellectual foundation was not sufficient for liberation. But it was necessary.

Some koans may seem impenetrable, or designed to defeat apprehension by logic, to send the practitioner on a leap beyond the rational — but a leap into what? Some have leapt into cutesy, pat answers, or drama, or pantomime, or some other make believe piece of theatre that is intended to convey something that will stand for insight beyond words. And have passed their koans, receiving the teacher's approval of their insight.

This anti-intellectual prejudice had great appeal to the sixties hippies who first attached themselves to the Japanese priests who taught in California at the beginning of the American Zen movement. Their ambitious followers quickly made plans and moved forward. They were confident and persuasive.

The appeal of their approach extends to people now who are suffering from overstimulation, the shallowness of pop culture, and the feelings of boredom, agitation, anxiety and depression that are the natural states of the modern urban mind. The refuge in simple aesthetics, stillness and order is appealing. But what is it that is appealing? Does it offer real refuge?

What do you want? What do you think makes a mature human life? What does it really take to behave decently in the midst of this world? What does it take to see deeply? To put an end to suffering? Who do you admire? How do you judge them? How do you want to live?

According to the dharma, there are three ways we can know something. One is through our perception. One is through inference drawn from our perception. One is through the words of an authoritative source. We are encouraged to trust ourselves. Not to throw our judgment away — incomplete as it may be — and give away the direction of our lives, in advance, to some confident person who promises they are a teacher.

We need a good place to practice, and a community of fellow practitioners who are devoted to training is a great help. We need guidance on the way.

But we are urged, when following the Buddhist path, to use our judgment, our intelligence, our own wisdom to find good sources of knowledge — human and literary, in experience and phenomena — and to do the work we need to do, humbly and with sincerity.

We are frequently reminded that it is up to each of us.

It is up to you.

There is no one else in this entire universe who can do it.

Hidden in Plain Sight

Buddha's disciples all gathered together to hear the Buddha teach one day, about 2500 years ago. Hundreds of them were there, and some had been present for many of his lectures. They expected a talk, but this time instead of speaking he held a flower up, and turned it slowly between his fingers. His entire teaching was contained in this single gesture.

Only one of all his disciples understood what he was teaching. In response to the turning flower, the monk called Mahakasyapa smiled. He understood. Nothing in the teaching was hidden from the other disciples there. They just did not have the ability to understand it. Yet.

It is in this sense that things are hidden in kata. There is no longer any need to intentionally hide things in the kata. In the days of the suppression of karate in Japanese-occupied Okinawa, karate practice itself was hidden from public view. There were times when karate moves were encoded in dance and made to look innocuous or decorative or gymnastic, instead of martial. That these moves contained the means for martial training was hidden, in a sense, from the prying eyes of outsiders.

But with regard to the karate kata we have now, what many regard as hidden material is actually just stuff you don't know yet. We can know it, we do have access to it, if we know how to dig deep into the kata and see what is there, in the open, if you know what to look for.

You do need the tools. Orienting in the wilderness requires more than toughness and determination. It takes a map, a compass, the ability to read the land and the sky. The longer you spend at it, the more familiar you become with the subtle signs you would have missed earlier in your experience. What would be even more important, especially at first, if you could get it, would be the guidance of a native, someone intimately familiar with the territory who could — and would— show you how to find your way.

In discovering the terrain of kata we also need to have the right tools and to use them to explore. If we have a teacher who knows it all - fantastic. But if we don't have such a guide, we make ourselves helpless if we pretend to have complete knowledge, or, if out of hopefulness or willful blindness, we follow someone who claims to have it when they do not. We practitioners need to be scrupulous in our assessment of what we know, and what we don't know. Then we can proceed to discover. And then, when we come upon something new, we can be open to it, interpret it, and have it for our use.

Karate is an oral tradition. Even if we could record in words or on video all the movements and everything we know about karate technique, it would quickly be lost and nearly impossible to recover once human beings stop living it through consistent training in the company of other people.

Passing the skills on is an arduous task, and when that work is no longer urgently required by the practical demands of self defense, when cultures change, and there is no longer a large number of dedicated practitioners passing on and preserving unchanged the full systems pioneered in the past, that perishable knowledge perishes. Or at least recedes from view.

Most modern practitioners of karate and of other martial arts have not been taught what is encoded in the movement of their kata.

Martial artists in Asia and in the West have sometimes preserved the movements of the kata without knowing why they were doing those movements in that exact form. These faithful practitioners — some unfairly criticized for being hidebound and "uncreative" — were handed a time capsule. They knew that someday someone would recover the knowledge embedded in the kata even if they had not had the chance to learn it all themselves. They had faith that valuable knowledge was preserved within the kata.

In the lifetime of my teachers, there have been two changes that have deeply affected the oral transmission of Okinawan karate. One of these was the rapid change from a rural agrarian culture to a modern urban culture. The other was warfare on Okinawa during WWII.

Take a walk around the Peace Memorial, at the southern tip of the island, and you will see granite markers recording the names of the hundreds of thousands of people who lost their lives in the Battle of Okinawa - a third of the Okinawan people, as well as many military people on all sides of the war.

Among those names are most of the great karate teachers of that generation. Look at the 20th century genealogies of any Okinawan family or the lineage chart of any major style of Okinawan karate, and you will see the birth dates vary decade by decade but the dates of death all say 1945 and 1946.

The death of a generation of teachers and the poverty, despair and chaos that followed the war years damaged the living transmission of knowledge and slowed the practice of karate for years. Collectivization and the Cultural Revolution in China caused a similar disruption in the transmission of traditional martial arts there.

Much of the Okinawan transmission remained intact. More and more of the knowledge that had been is being reverse-engineered back into the kata. By getting the analytical tools that come from the study of grappling, tuite, throwing, kyushojutsu, target analysis, skillful internal and external energy production, chi kung, atemi, posture, Chinese medicine theory and breathing, it becomes a more and more natural part of karate practice to understand every nuance, the possibilities of every move and every moment of each kata.

The richness is unbelievable. The more you learn, the more evident it is that there is too

much material in even a single kata to master in a lifetime. Discoveries continually open up new discoveries, like an endlessly blooming flower, turned slowly in the hands of a master.

Beginner's Mind

Traffic was barely moving, and the street was packed from curb to curb with drivers who were not where they wanted to be. Talk about postponing joy. For these folks it was pretty much cancelled.

A car sped up. A cab stopped short. Brakes squealed. Bumpers collided. A hood crumpled. A radiator hissed.

The drivers bailed out of their cars already sweating, with tempers hotter than the oven at Ray's Original Pizza at lunch hour.

But there they were. Face to face. A pace apart, shouting with rage, spitting bullets, faces contorted and red.

One had enough. He spun forward, and with a furious round house kick he brought the blade of his foot within a half inch of the chest of the motionless cabbie in front of him. The cabbie sized the guy up in a nanosecond and smacked him down to the pavement.

I recognized the technique of the kicker instantly. In his martial arts class, with rules requiring light or no contact, the move would have scored him a point. Here the habits he developed for skillful sparring cost him a septum.

Another incident, this one in training:

Two guys are practicing together. One is an experienced martial artist, the other just a few months into training. The experienced guy had grown up in the country, doing hard physical work every day for years, before beginning his professional career. He had the even confidence of someone who has done what he needed to do. The inexperienced guy thought the world of himself, and to him, the rest of the world appeared in need of special ed. This guy did not want to condition his body incrementally over time. He wanted to go for it. He decided he would teach the big ox a lesson. The new guy threw a massive punch, with his whole body behind it, at the center of the chest of the experienced man. The big guy leaned a shoulder back, letting the punch slip by. The new guy's punch connected with the stationary forearm of the experienced guy, just below the big guy's elbow. With a pop, the arm of the new guy shattered and became useless.

Consistent training in martial arts is extremely valuable. There is no way to make the most of your skills, your body, your mind or your will without consistently training and sincerely challenging yourself every time you do.

But there are extremes to be avoided in training. One is assuming that because you know a technique and that it has worked time and again under the controlled conditions of the training hall that you are somehow inoculated against attack.

Another is the temptation to ‘make it real’ and give or get a permanent injury — hands, feet, knees and brain are the big ones — which lead to disability, not strength. The body is not designed to take injury again and again. There may come a time when the risk is required, but day after day as the injuries accumulate, the result of training will be the opposite of the one you wanted to achieve.

For practitioners in law enforcement, experience on the street and experience in the dojo inform each other. The street prevents complacency, and the belief that outcomes are predictable. The dojo gives us the chance to stay sharp. Everyone can use this approach.

I was out toward the edge of a little riot one night, moving toward the center where the crowd was surging. I heard a woman scream and saw a guy with something in his hand running away from the scream and toward me. I told him to stop. He slowed down. There was no doubt that he had just assaulted someone and taken something from them. I could not back off and call the police. I was the police. I told him to stop right there. He did. I told him to drop it now. He did. I could see it was not his.

He was cool. He knew he was caught. Getting the first handcuff on him was easy, but as I began to move his wrists together, he started to tense up and turn. His friends or people who suddenly became his friends were gathering around. I had radioed in, but could not convey my exact location. I needed to get this guy under control immediately.

You never know in advance how this kind of thing will go. In hindsight, things seem inevitable. In the moment they are entirely fluid. Writing the report later in the shift, you can describe the course of events in a logical narrative, explaining what you saw and heard and your rationale for what you did. You can convey the tactics and the legal decision-making in a clear and reasoned sequence. In the heat of the moment, in the midst of chaos, violence, threats of violence, distraction and sensory overload, all you can rely on is your training and your team.

That this guy had hurt someone was clear. The victim came running up after him, screaming. That he would continue to do this to other people was likely — from what I saw, he was familiar with how to do this; it was not his first time.

Would it have been compassionate of me to let him run off and tell the girl not to be so attached to her property, that it was only money, and to get new credit cards and ID? Would it have been compassionate of me to let this guy go on to prey upon other people, people who trusted him perhaps, people who are weaker than him or vulnerable for whatever reason at the moment at which they encounter him? Would it have been compassionate of me to allow him to collect the terrible karma that would come if he continued to steal, intimidate, injure and maybe kill some innocent people? What kind of life could he expect if he were not stopped from going down this path? Couldn't I benefit him, his victim, and all the other potential victims he might harm over the course of the evening or of his lifetime, by stopping him decisively right now?

I thought so.

So I applied my knee to a pressure point I knew how to use very well, and which I hoped would stun him. It did. I quickly got the other hand cuff on, and several other officers assisted me in getting him to the back of the patrol vehicle.

There have been times when it went other ways.

The phrase used in martial arts training that refers to the openness to immediate experience is called “beginner’s mind.” This concept is sometimes misunderstood as making a virtue of inexperience or of ignorance. That is not right.

The “beginner’s mind” does not presume to know the outcome of a situation. A beginner’s mind responds spontaneously to shifting conditions. It does not rely on rote or autopilot responses and expect them to automatically work.

Some Western Zen practitioners have taken this phrase up as a slogan to justify their non-trying and not-training. They miss the point. And under the pressure of life and death, the very pressure they pay lip service to every day in the Zendo, that approach proves useless.

At another point in Buddhist liturgy, it famously says that “life is like a dream, an illusion...” and so on. How is it that people can miss the point of this?

Buddhism never says that life is merely a dream, merely an illusion. As if it was nothing. As if it was meaningless. Quite the contrary.

It is *like* them. Life is like a dream or an illusion in that, like them, life arises and vanishes without a trace. Like them, life continually changes. Like them, life is contingent on causes and conditions. And like, them conditions which we think may be permanent and unchanging are instead continually shifting, requiring us to rely upon our training, to always be strong, do right, and stay focused on our purpose.

That is the mindset of a sincere beginner. It is good to keep it.

Moving from the Center

The way we normally walk minimizes the amount of energy we use to move. It is efficient. It is a kind of controlled falling. It is subtle, but you can see it if you look for it. We shift our weight onto the supporting leg, put the opposite leg forward, lean toward it and land on it. That is what we do with each step, and it works well enough under normal circumstances. But our “normal” circumstances are highly predictable and have been designed to be. They are not natural in the least. When we walk, we walk on built surfaces — paved streets and interior floors — which are uniform, and mostly free of obstructions. It has distorted the way we move, and we are conditioned to it.

If you were walking along an unfamiliar path in the dark, you would not walk with this controlled falling method. You would tend to leave your center over your foundation, so that if the foot you are extending to take your next step encounters an obstruction, you are able to adjust your step. If you were in a “controlled fall,” with your weight already extended over the front foot as it encountered the obstruction, your fall would no longer be “controlled.” You would just fall.

In combatives, we need to assume not just an irregular surface under foot, but unpredictable disruptions of our balance by our opponent. The opponent will move unpredictably, in a violent way, and will be striking and grabbing at us. We will be at once vigorously avoiding him and emitting energy toward him. Our defensive and attacking movement will tend away from the stable center of our own body.

The dynamics of a combative interaction require that we not use our mobility in a way that can be easily upset. Instead of relying on controlled falling, we need to body-shift in a way that will allow our body to remain over a stable foundation until we are committed to the new position. This kind of stepping — it works in any direction — is a fundamental principal of mobility in combative systems. It takes more energy than ordinary walking, but it is less predictable, much faster, and much more secure.

It is the rationale for the “patterns of movement” — the shuffle steps and pivots — used in police defensive tactics.

Leaders, both in the East and the West, looked to fighting skills for metaphoric guidance in the conduct of all aspects of leadership and life. The pressure and high stakes of battle stripped away speculation and provided a true efficacy test of theory. If you are right, you prevail. If you are in error, you are destroyed. Moving from the center is a useful idea.

The 14th Century Zen master Dogen taught his students that the only way we live is in this moment. The past is gone. The future does not exist. An idea as true then as it is now. To be effective, we need to live in the moment.

Any warrior can attest, that in the heat and pressure of combat, any deflection of the

fighter's attention — to the errors or successes of the past, to the plans, fear or hope for the future — risks taking the attention away from the intense, dynamic threat in the present moment.

But. We have to acknowledge that, both for trainers and for operators, we need to learn from the past – what worked and what didn't – and we need to prepare for the future. Our lives and the lives of those we are sworn to protect depend on it.

How can we rationalize the need to live in this moment, the only moment of reality that exists, while fulfilling our obligation to the people we serve?

Dogen gave advice on that very question. In the Zen monastery of his time, the monks had the luxury of living in the present if they wanted to. But the person who was always looking to the past and the future, by the nature of his job, was the cook. The cook had to prepare for the next days' meal. He needed to predict the number of people he would be serving, how hungry they would be, how much to buy and to prepare, a day or a week or a month in advance.

Prepare for tomorrow as the work of today.

Simple. But we often don't do it. We often live in a kind of controlled fall. Easy going, expecting a flat, predictable path of life, falling toward the future, heedless of the dangers.

If we move in a "combative" manner — keeping our foundation beneath us as we create the next moment — we can be sure that even though circumstances may change in an unexpected way, we won't collapse, but instead can have the strength and stability to manage the change effectively, adapt to new conditions, and prevail.

If you are over your head in debt, paying only the interest, you are in a controlled fall. Any change in circumstances can cause a collapse. If you are out of shape, unable to perform under a sudden escalation in pressure, you may get by. But you may not. That also is a life as "controlled fall."

If you are complacent about maintaining skills you once had, if you are coasting, if you are hoping for the best but not preparing for difficulties, you are putting everything you worked for, including your life, at risk.

That only means that we need to prepare for tomorrow as the work of today. Simple. It means keep a foundation under you as you take each step. That is the essence of "patterns of movement" in police Defensive Tactics in a combative application. Applied to other aspects of life, it is the way to assure that we all can perform in a way that will serve the people who depend on us, and which will make our own practice and careers as successful and rewarding as they should be.

Time, Space & Mind: The Three Dimensions of the Reactionary Gap

To strike your opponent, you need to enter through a gap in his defenses. If your opponent's defenses are sound, you cannot enter, and you cannot strike him. There is a variety of ways to enter. You can overpower the defenses. You can deceive your opponent into misplacing his defense and so take advantage of an opportunity where he is exposed. You can perceive a weakness in your opponent's posture or awareness. Your opponent will regard your defenses the same way.

In medieval Japanese budo, these openings in the opponent's defenses, these opportunities to strike, were called "suki."

A medieval Japanese text on the subject, published as one of the essays in "The Unfettered Mind," was written as a letter by Zen monk Takuan Soho to Yagyū Munenori, sword master to the family of the Shogun, the military dictator of Japan at that time.

Takuan was an influential person, abbot of one of the chief Zen temples in Japan. He was equivalent in influence to a Pope in medieval Europe. He was employed by the military government. He addressed his comments to the senior instructor in the most prestigious military art in the highly militarized world of his time.

His comments were ostensibly a discourse on swordsmanship, but can easily be read as advice in Zen practice, using swordsmanship as a metaphor. In his letter, he applies Zen insights and theory to the practice of swordsmanship. Takuan did not practice swordsmanship himself. He may have been motivated by a desire to persuade the leaders of his nation of the practical utility of Zen in the life of the samurai.

Takuan talks about avoiding "suki" by means of the "mind abiding nowhere." This is an application of the theory underlying the Zen practice of the cultivation of mental stability and clarity in seated Zen meditation to the practice of combat with swords.

D.T. Suzuki, one of the leading importers of Zen to the West in the early 20th century, cites Takuan's letter and analyzes it, in his book "Zen in Japanese Culture." Suzuki was a scholar, trained in Western philosophy, but also in the practice and theory of Japanese Zen.

Both Takuan and Suzuki emphasize that the mind that is completely free to respond unhindered to the demands of the moment can also be described as the mind that is immovable — not deflected by either stimulation or impulse.

Both Takuan and Suzuki seem to take for granted that a suki arises as a result of a mental flaw — a gap in attention or alertness. As acute as their observations are, this presumption is one-sided, probably due to the fact that these two commentators were

not martial practitioners and had a psychological bias to their analytical approach.

Less-experienced fighters seem to go to the other extreme. In a sparring match or a confrontation, these individuals look for a physical “gap” in the defenses of the opponent. Waiting for a physical gap to open up, their fleeting opportunity is lost. They lose initiative and fall into a reactive mode, in which they respond to their opponent’s initiative and lose any advantage they may have had.

Their analytical prejudice is physical — they neglect other aspects of combative engagement.

Today in martial arts and police combative training, we work with the same set of tactical considerations as medieval Japanese martial artists did. The opportunity to take advantage of a *suki*, or gap, in an opponent’s defense, and at the same time avoid a window of vulnerability to open in our own defenses, arises in three dimensions of experience simultaneously: time, space and mind.

The dimension of mind has several aspects. One aspect is alertness. This is a cultivated ability to maintain a clear and stable focus on the matter at hand, without being distracted by parts of reality such as the opponent’s body, by elements of the environment, or by one’s own thoughts, emotions and impulses. This ability is developed. You have to practice stability and clarity under pressure, just as you have to practice physical technique, to increase your strength, speed, endurance, balance, focus, etc.

Another is will: the intention to take the initiative and prevail in the encounter. This aspect of mind is also developed through training.

Another aspect of the dimension of mind, however, is not trained, but inherent. Although it can be modified slightly, it cannot be eliminated. So if we are aware of it, and know how to use it, we can take advantage of this flaw in our opponent’s ability to respond to our attack. This aspect of mind is called the “reactionary gap.”

An unanticipated arm’s length attack is almost impossible to stop. That is why, as a police officer, you are taught not to permit a subject within your reactionary gap. The reactionary gap can be described in space, as a distance of six feet from an empty hand opponent, let’s say, or it can be described in time, as 300 to 500 milliseconds for a normal person, to perceive an opponent’s motion, interpret it and respond to it.

A major league baseball player has a reactionary gap – an ability to perceive the path of travel of the pitch and respond to it by swinging the bat – of about 100 to 150 milliseconds. This is much faster than an untrained person could respond, but still slow enough for a skilled pitcher to get a well-thrown breaking ball past him.

A famous test of the reactionary gap in armed encounters is called the Tueller Principle.

The idea came out of a court case in which an officer shot a knife-wielding subject at what seemed to the jury to be a great distance. The defense contended that the distance was so close as to leave the officer no choice but to shoot or die. They tested their theory.

The test showed that a knife-wielding subject could close the distance on an officer with a holstered gun and kill the officer before that officer could draw his gun, from a distance of 21 feet or greater. And that was an average subject and an average officer. Given a subject who is a fast runner, or an officer whose attention is divided or is slower in drawing his firearm, that reactionary gap can open to 30 or 40 feet or more.

The effectiveness of any response to threat stimulus will depend on the quality of the attention of the responder, and on the habit of responding to attacks accurately, with strength, skill and speed, under pressure.

We will respond, successfully or otherwise, in the dimensions of time, space and mind.

When Zen-inspired Japanese martial arts literature describes becoming “one with the opponent,” they are not recommending that you become the same as that person, indistinguishable from him, or with the same objectives or methods as him.

The advice given in that poetic phrase is to close the gap between your mind and his mind, between your body and his body. With practice, you can intuit how quickly he can respond; you can sense positions in which you can close the distance to him and execute a technique in an unexpected way; you can feel when you can enter his reactionary gap without opening up one of your own.

This does depend on taking the initiative. But it does not mean plunging heedlessly in like a kamikaze.

I worked with a group of new trainees who were asked, on the first day of training, to take one of their instructors to the ground. The instructors were skilled. Although the trainees may not have thought of “finding a gap,” it was evident that the trainees could not find a gap in their instructor’s defense.

One by one, they lunged at the knees or hips of the instructor, or tried to strike, push or grab. Each one failed in the takedown.

Over the course of the training, their skill increased. They were able to take command of the confrontations. And one of the things these trainees learned which allowed them to be effective, was never to abandon control of the situation, never to plunge in while neglecting the qualities of the moment, without an objective for each action, without regard to the outcome of the encounter. They had learned what they were looking at and what to do about it.

The body has to be trained and skillful. The mind has to be stable and strong. The will must be resilient – neither impetuous nor hesitant. That way we can perceive and exploit the suki in our opponent's defenses without opening any gap in our own.

Shu Ha Ri: Three Stages of Training

The three terms “Shu Ha Ri” are used to describe the stages of practice in traditional Japanese arts. The terms are used in sword fighting and aikido, but also in other Japanese martial arts, martial arts influenced by Japanese culture, such as karate, and even in flower arranging, tea ceremony, traditional brush painting and others.

“Shu Ha Ri” can be translated as “keep,” “break,” and “depart.” Or as “follow,” “detach,” and “leave.”

“Shu,” the beginning stage of practice, is described as the stage of following a teacher and learning the technique precisely. “Ha,” the second stage of practice, refers to the time when the practitioner penetrates new dimensions of the material he is mastering. “Ri,” the third and final stage, describes the time when the practitioner abandons the constraints of learned technique, and is free and spontaneous.

Understanding the stages of practice with this classification is useful, but they have been misinterpreted.

For us, following a teacher is unusual. Sometimes Western practitioners reject this idea altogether, but most in martial arts go to the other extreme and believe they must follow a teacher slavishly and unquestioningly. Either way, when they hear about the “Shu” stage of practice, they may be reinforced in their mistaken understanding of what it means to diligently follow a teacher.

When we hear about “Ha,” we can mistake this for the need to “personalize” our movement, to make it special to us, like a label by which observers might differentiate our way of doing the art from all the other people who are doing it. This would not be accurate.

As for the “Ri” phase of practice, some people think that in order to be a genuine master, they should set aside the forms they have been meticulously learning since they began to practice. That they should just move randomly or impulsively. That they should make up their own special katas or techniques, and that in this way they can become someone unique and noteworthy.

But servile obedience to another person, mechanical repetition of memorized postures, or the abandonment of traditional movement will not lead to mastery.

There is another way of looking at “Shu Ha Ri” that may be more helpful to us modern Western practitioners of Asian martial arts.

Think of the birth of an eagle.

In the egg, all the conditions must be perfect. The egg is produced and protected. If

everything is right — the internal biochemistry, the ki of the creature in the egg, and the outer conditions provided by the parents — then the baby eagle will grow, and the egg stage will be fulfilled. But the bird cannot remain in the egg once this stage is complete.

This first stage is “Shu,” the stage of Keeping, that is, keeping all the conditions precisely right for the new life of practice to begin.

The second stage we can call Breaking. In this stage, the arduous task of breaking out of the confines of the shell must be undertaken. If the new eagle does not have the strength to break out of the confining shell, it will be deformed or die. However, even if the young bird is healthy, the hatchling inside needs the assistance of the parent to get out of the shell, just as a practitioner needs the assistance of a skilled teacher to mature.

Eggs don’t hatch just from the inside. The parent bird has to peck the shell just at the right time, in just the right place, to assist the young bird to hatch. They work together to achieve success in this stage.

The second stage requires effort. It is not about making a personal statement or being different or special or better than anyone who has gone before. It means taking initiative, facing difficulty, persevering and succeeding in mastery of the material you have to work with. In our case, as martial artists, our own body and mind are the material of our art. With the assistance of our teacher, we break out of old habits and limits.

The third stage is Leaving. This is like leaving the nest. It is the stage when we are mature, adult, free to make choices, to take on challenges and to succeed or to fail by virtue of our own effort, aspiration and vision. It does not mean abandoning our teacher or our art. It does not imply a need to set aside all we have achieved through our hard work.

It means that we use the tools we have developed to take off on our own path of mastery.

On the street, on the battlefield, or in our own hearts and minds, to achieve this third phase of practice we need to apply our skills to something worth achieving. And do it courageously for the rest of our lives.

Stage Three Training

Stage Three training is hinted at in practice literature in the martial arts, in meditation and in mystical traditions East and West, but it is not explained in detail.

The reason it is not explained is not to deliberately withhold information that would be helpful to practitioners. It is because the descriptions are likely to be either ignored or not believed or misinterpreted by those people who are not advanced enough in their practice to make practical use of the information. Being exposed to these ideas too early in one's career can derail a life of practice altogether. That is why the hints and allusive language are used – the hints and allusions become clear when your practice is ripened enough to use the information.

It can only happen after about 30 years of sincere training. There are many people who have been doing martial arts for thirty years. But if they are doing two or three hours a week for 30 years, or if they are doing the same one or two year curriculum and repeating it for 30 years, they will not be prepared for stage three training.

That two year curriculum or three hours a week are not a bad thing. That can be a good way to stay strong and sharp. But it requires much deeper training than that to practice at stage three. It requires that the pressure be on for thirty years. There are not too many people who have the inner and outer conditions that allow them to be challenged, to improve, to expand their knowledge and deepen their experience, to teach and take responsibility for the development of other people's practice, decade after decade. But only that constant pressure and practice will produce the level of experience necessary to launch stage three training.

One example of the harmful effect of premature teaching of the methods and values of stage three training happened in the American Zen community. People were confused; they heard an old story that they interpreted according to their prejudices, without the knowledge base needed to interpret it as the author intended, and as a result they based their ideas and actions on a nihilistic misunderstanding of Buddhism, and had a barren practice as a result.

The story actually does tell of an incident at which third stage training begins. It comes from the life of Tokusan Sengan (782-865) a Chinese monk. Tokusan was a scholar of the Diamond Cutter Sutra. This sutra, or Buddhist teaching, is a prajna paramita sutra, an extremely profound and the most philosophically influential Buddhist work in China at that time. (The Diamond Cutter Sutra is the oldest known printed book in the world.)

At that time, Buddhism was a scholarly undertaking that involved learning the canonical texts and commentaries, and testing the depth and agility of your understanding in public debate.

At the same time, there was a new approach to Buddhism taking hold in China, called

Ch'an (Zen in the Japanese pronunciation.) Ch'an emphasized direct experience over analytic philosophy. Tokusan Sengan set out on the road to debate representatives of the Zen school, to show the public that their understanding was lacking, and restore the prestige and authority of scholastic Buddhism.

On his way to a great Zen monastery in the district of Li-yang, he decided to stop for a cup of tea. The keeper of the teahouse was an old lady. He asked her for some tea to "refresh his mind." Seeing the bundle he carried on his back, she inquired as to what he was carrying. Tokusan explained that it was Shoryo's great commentary on the Diamond Cutter Sutra.

"In that case," the tea lady said, "I have a question for you. If you can answer it I will be glad to bring you some tea for free. But if you cannot answer, then I am sorry but I will not be able to help you."

"What is your question?"

"According to the Diamond Cutter Sutra, the past mind cannot be grasped, the future mind cannot be grasped and the present mind cannot be grasped. Correct?"

"Yes, that is quite correct."

"In that case," said the tea lady, "Which mind is it that you would like to refresh?"

Tokusan was stunned. He had no answer. Suddenly his mind opened, and he directly perceived the vast reality he had only understood intellectually before. He took his commentary and threw it in the fire, finally free of the burden of the intellectual baggage that he had carried with him for his entire life. He now was liberated through the direct perception of the reality the dharma is intended to teach.

This story is a classic of Zen argument: the rustic lady has more honest wisdom than the accomplished monk, and the privileging of the simple well-timed provocative thought over a life of study and reflection points to Zen's emphasis on experience and perception over intellect and philosophy.

But that is only a valid teaching for an accomplished master. It is not a universal prescription for liberation. In fact, it was never recommended that ignorant and untrained people discard canonical wisdom. Obviously the tea lady had read the sutra, and read it well enough and reflected on it deeply enough to recognize in it a profound and deeply unconventional insight.

Yet this very story was superficially read by several generations of immature and impatient Western Zen practitioners. They decided that scholarship was foolish, phony, and uncool. And so they sat on their cushions, doing what exactly, they probably could not tell.

This voided their opportunity to use Buddhism to cultivate their body and mind and to achieve the purpose for which the dharma was taught: to put an end to suffering forever.

That is why it is essential not to read my description of third stage training as if the third stage is something advanced and desirable, something you can skip ahead to, or something to strive to achieve, like a new rank.

Instead, it is like a molting. It requires an act of will not to retreat from it, but it can't be initiated or hastened by an act of will.

If you have the foundation of an intense commitment to daily personal practice aimed at perfection, a three to four hour a day, seven day a week commitment, for ten years or more, it will come.

If you have a dojo full of people who, no matter how sincere they are about using their time for training, are training 2 to 3 hours a week, then you will be unable to create a group training situation in which, for example, stable Samadhi can be cultivated for hours on end. You have to do that on your own.

Stage Three training does not discard the years of habit and cultivation. It builds on them. It still involves training — many hours a day. It still involves teaching, though in a different way. Instead of using a dojo setting and formal teacher-student relationships, teaching becomes more spontaneous and individualized.

It involves the development of a stable, clear mind built in level one, of a mind skillfully permeated by a concern for the well being of others built in level two as a dedicated teacher, and taken further, focused on the wisdom that is taught every moment by every cloud, person and tree.

Message to my Friends in Practice

When we are young, looking toward the future, time seems unbearably slow. When young lovers are waiting for the moment when they will meet, a minute seems like it will never end.

When we are middle-aged, like in summertime, perspective is short. We act with calculation and urgency, each moment distinct in its character and its importance. But time compresses in retrospect. All our days and decades of deeds, later in life, seem indistinguishably mingled, like the grains in a bucketful of sand. In old age, life seems brief.

The samurai in their early years were covered up in the struggle for power. They wanted it, they tasted it, and no amount of blood, as for their successor tyrants today, was too great a price to pay for it. They were overwrought. Attack could come at any time. The moment of opportunity could open and close in an instant. Hesitation meant death. Haste meant death. Passivity meant death. Preoccupied day and night with strategy, betrayal, opportunity, and decision, even the most disciplined ambitious mind became exhausted. They needed refreshment.

They found it in tea.

Every warlord needs a break once in a while. And whatever else they may be, these powerful achievers, making their mark on the world, are smart. They know bullshit when they see it. And they know the genuine article as well.

So a small spare simple room in an uncultivated rustic environment with nothing to distract the mind or stimulate the senses, where time can expand and nothing is needed and nothing can be done, is something to value.

In the simple familiar gestures of the ceremonial form, there is no compulsion to be special or to take control. It is enough to be. It is a relief to just be, just to live as natural and unaffected as the lilies of the field.

And to drink from a simple raku bowl and taste the field in the fragrance of the tea, its warmth permeating your cold body and the flavor sharpening your dulled and distracted mind, is a good thing.

For a moment, everything is in place. And you are where you should be. And for that moment nothing need be done.

It could be the longest night of the year. The longest night of your life. With all the universe suspended by a delicate thread. But still. Here you are. Like the light of a star.

We can see from the example of these titans of desire, of all people, and of our own lives,

that time is not a thing. It is a perspective.

William Blake augured this same aspiration to innocence when he wrote:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour

I am so honored to share this world and this eternity with you.

May your every moment be blessed.

President John Adams on "No First Attack"

In *John Adams*, a biography of the second president of the United States by David McCullough, we get a look at Adams' life as he followed many paths — as lawyer, farmer, scholar, revolutionary, orator, member of the First Continental Congress and, eventually, President. John Adams lived in a world where war and the threat of war was a fact of life. His way of dealing with martial conflict 200 years ago has lessons relevant to us, as 21st century martial artists.

In this book McCullough writes:

One evening, watching his granddaughters Susanna and Abigail blowing soap bubbles with one of his clay pipes, Adams wondered about the "allegorical lesson" of the scene:

Adams wrote: "They fill the air of the room with their bubbles, their air balloons, which roll and shine reflecting the light of the fire and candles, and which are very beautiful. There can be no more perfect emblem of the physical and political and theological scenes of human life. Morality only is eternal. All the rest is balloon and bubble from the cradle to the grave."

Adams, as a former power broker, now an old man, was reflecting on the impermanence of the phenomena of life. When we practice the martial arts, even as we prepare for conflict, or prepare ourselves to face the demands of ordinary life, we ought not wait till our old age to reflect on what it is that will really last. We ought to ask, "What will really affect the quality of our own lives and the lives of the people we touch?" I can say that from my point of view, and from the point of view of John Adams, it is not our accumulation of power itself, our ranks, titles, trophies or knowledge. Rather, it is the quality of the strength, determination, kindness, and decency that we embody and pass on to those we teach and practice with. If our influence in these matters is good, it will outlast us and all those who will ever know us, perhaps for centuries.

For John Adams, this was not a matter of abstract philosophy. He was deeply concerned with self-defense during his Presidency. The political principle he followed on a national level reminded me of the principle of "karate ni sente nashi" ("There is no first attack in karate".)

During his presidency, John Adams' position on national defense was opposed from both sides of the political spectrum. Of the two parties who opposed him, one group advocated heavy spending on national defense, and going to war as soon as possible.

The other party opposed investing in defense, and opposed going to war. Adams had experienced the American Revolution first hand and knew what fighting meant. He believed that, under the circumstances, weakness made attack inevitable. He supported a strong national defense, while vigorously striving to avoid war. Adams prevailed in his position and was vindicated.

This is a good demonstration of the karate principle of "no first attack" — while nonetheless training consistently and diligently. "No first attack" is not a matter of pacifism or passivity. It is a practice of martial strategy and morality at once.

It seems clear that at age 90, John Adams' insight into the impermanence of things and the endurance of virtue was possible because of the way he lived his life. He had been vigorous. His mind was now peaceful. At the end of his life, he was not nursing grudges, fearing his waning strength, or seeking his place in history. He could see what mattered and what was trivial. He had been courageous and strong. His mind was clear. He could see what would last and what would pass away.

His ability to obtain this degree of clarity and insight itself was a result of the way he lived. It is difficult for us to see the way in which our actions, of body, speech and mind, (our karma) influence the quality of our understanding. But if we look closely, we can see that our minds condition our choices, condition the quality of our lives, and form the impact we have on others.

This is why it is useful to understand the somatic foundation of mind training in karate. The idea of "mind training" in karate involves a much broader concept of mind than that usually found in the West, where mind and body are often divided from each other. Understanding the somatic foundation of mind training in karate helps to explain the relationship between the way our physical training conditions our minds, and the way this affects the way we make strategic decisions in conflict situations and otherwise. It offers insight into the importance of the "No first attack" principle.

When we use the word "mind," we may be referring to widely differing mental functions. Those relevant to "mind training" in karate include: proprioception, sensation, categorization, concept formation, cognition, calculation, reflection, perception, discrimination, awareness, understanding, emotion, apperception, mental stability, clarity, sense of self, philosophical orientation, knowledge, will, intention, mind-beyond-thought and insight into reality... and all of them are often lumped together in the one term "mind."

All of these aspects of mind have a physical foundation, and all are susceptible to positive change through the skillful use of the body. This is only logical, since in reality, the body is not separate from the mind. They are integrated; they act as a whole.

Thus, in the practice of martial arts, neither the "search for knowledge," nor mechanical repetition of movements will suffice to make your defensive skills effective, or your development as a human being very deep.

In karate practice, we have to know what we are after, acquire the means that will take us forward, and go. We must be patient and consistent in our application of effort. We must continually be scrupulous in examining our motivation, our methods and the

results we are achieving. We must refuse to be sidetracked, intimidated or encumbered. Then we can hope to finish our work before our time runs out. This is mind training as well as physical training.

With this high degree of tenacity and attention, we will discover the purpose of karate.

As a strong leader or a serious practitioner, it may happen that you will not be appreciated fully for your sacrifices and good qualities. It will happen that people will stand in your way and create difficulties for you. You may feel alone. If you are provoked to anger, don't get angry. Just persevere in doing what is right. Then, at the end of the day, at the end of your life, you will see that what you have done is good.

To Protect and Serve Everyone

Indra, a god of great power in the ancient Indian pantheon, asks in the Maha Prajna Paramita Sutra, how he could best protect the dharma. The word dharma refers to the Buddha's teaching about phenomenal reality, as well as the phenomena themselves.

Subhuti, the character in the sutra speaking for the Buddha, replied, "Do you see any dharmas you can protect?"

Subhuti's question implies that while Indra may understand the value of the prajna paramita — about transcendent wisdom, the great insight into the nature of reality which alone, according to Buddha's teaching, puts an end to ignorance and so puts an end to suffering — he does not understand everything.

Now Subhuti, with his question, pushes Indra to understand more deeply.

If, as the prajna paramita teachings prove, all dharmas — all existing things — are contingent upon other things, then they cannot exist in isolation, as self-standing, unchanging entities with properties inherent in themselves.

This means that all the existing things which we usually perceive as separate entities actually exist as a function of the causes and conditions which bring these things into existence and sustain them until they cease.

It means that dharmas are also contingent upon the parts which comprise them, and all of those parts also are temporary constructions upon which our minds project a label, an idea and a self-nature.

It means that all dharmas therefore are contingent, not only on causes and conditions and their parts, but also upon the mind of the observer — someone who lays upon the shapes and colors of visual reality, for example, labels, ideas, memories, expectations, and so on.

This is not to say, according to the prajna paramita teachings, that there is nothing out there in the world. It is to say that there are no fixed things in existence for Indra to protect.

Indra understands this point and then asks, well then, how do I protect Bodhisattvas? (Bodhisattvas are the enlightening beings who live their lives according to the three trainings of proper personal conduct, deep mental stability and clarity and deep insight into the nature of reality and follow their path to Buddhahood by saving beings from suffering.)

The previous question gave Subhuti the chance to point out the emptiness, or lack of self-existence, of objects. This new question is an opportunity for Subhuti to reveal to

Indra the emptiness, or lack of self existence, of persons.

Subhuti explains in this sutra ,that if the Bodhisattvas truly practice their insight into the nature of reality deeply, they are in no need of protection from Indra or from anyone else; that insight itself is the only true protection, the only means by which any mind can be freed from ignorance and the suffering that arises from it.

Subhuti, speaking for the Buddha, tells Indra that the only way Indra can protect the dharma, the only way he can protect people, is to himself become a practitioner of the dharma — become someone whose life is itself a manifestation of the practice of the three trainings — gain insight into the nature of reality, and so put an end to suffering for himself and others.

Having taken the Bodhisattva vow, I vowed to save all beings. Having taken the law enforcement oath, I am sworn to protect and serve the public. In neither case does it say “except for jerks,” or “if you like the person.”

You and I need to act with skillful means, with appropriate action, in every case – not using the same action in every case. If I run toward the sound of shouting and violence to save someone, is my action inconsistent with Subhuti’s advice to Indra? Should I just let the person get beaten up? Is there really no one to protect? Should I yell at them: “Start meditating now! Because only insight into the nature of reality can ultimately save them or anyone else!!”

In the heat of the moment, there is no time for anyone to prepare. In each present moment, my skillful means – acting on the basis of my vow – means I do step in to remove the person from danger, or remove the threat to the person.

It would be ignorant to think that I have saved that person permanently, or to think that the person I did save temporarily had fixed properties that defined him or her for all time, in relation to me or others. Because the next day, I might be putting that same person in handcuffs after they shot the person they were fighting with the day before.

It is compassionate to arrest that aggressor, because it helps them avoid collecting bad karma from doing more murders, protects the other victims and their families, and protects many anonymous and uninvolved members of society, because they do not have to continually encounter predators stronger than themselves running wild and unchecked.

Do I stand by and tell them I cannot save them? Do I fall into the belief that I have?

Or do I understand that there are no dharmas to protect, and that ultimately, there is no way to the end of suffering besides living a life that manifests the skillful compassion and transcendent wisdom of the Buddha dharma?

All Perfect

A samurai stood at the head of his troops, on the edge of the field of battle. He was at the height of his power, a master of the arts of the sword and strategy, an accomplished political leader and poet as well. It was April. The cherry blossoms fell from the trees, and with every breeze, thousands and thousands of the blossoms filled the air. They were beautiful, and fleeting. He watched them fly from the trees. He watched them fall.

He said to his friend, "You could spend your entire life searching for the perfect one and never waste a moment." As a practitioner, he understood the profound beauty of a life lived in the endless pursuit of perfection.

Later that day, he was mortally wounded in battle. The blood flowed from his wounds, and his life ebbed away. He spoke again to his friend, who now kneeled beside him. The heavenly storm of cherry blossoms swirled around them, for a moment obscuring the land and the sky, hiding the dead and dying soldiers around them on the battlefield. The samurai looked at the cherry blossoms as if he had never seen them before. He said, "All perfect!"

What had changed? The quality of the falling cherry blossoms had not changed in that one hour, from the beginning of the battle to the end of it. But the warrior's mind had changed. He understood something in the moments before his death that he had missed all his life, despite his power, despite his achievements. Having let go of his attachment to an imagined ideal of perfection outside this moment, an ideal he could no longer pursue, he recognized for the first time that right here, right now, all we see, all we are, is perfect, with nothing extra, nothing lacking. Nothing but this moment, perfect as it is.

The Call of Heaven

There is a time when we will hear the call of heaven. The time will come when we will no longer be drawn to the things of this world, no longer held to this world by desire. We will be free.

There are such people around us now. You may not recognize them unless you are one of them. They may be rich or poor, they may be blind or lame, they may be living in another country, under an unfamiliar name, but they are here on earth with us. Ordinary duties no longer hold them to this world. Only a trace of them remains.

When you see golden light in a cloudless sky, you see the brilliant clarity of their world, and it is incomprehensibly beyond any concern we may have. It is beyond any concern we may have for houses and cars, food and drink, life and death, status and pleasure, name and form.

“No longer held to this world by desire” means looking upon this landscape, this human world, this realm of desire, with equanimity and love, seeing its transience and its suffering and the inevitable end of its suffering.

“No longer held to this world by desire” means leaving this world. Leaving the body behind in death or walking the earth a while longer. Either way, there is no difference in the quality of mind.

Detached from desire, but vigorous in loving action. Benefitting beings without fear or favor.

This is attainable by every being who wants this. This is nirvana.

Nirvana is sometimes translated as “extinction,” as in the extinction of a flame. This is misunderstood as “going out of existence.” This is an error. What ceases is not “you.” What ceases is your mental disturbance, your error, your ignorance, your suffering.

What arises in its place is your Buddha nature. Your wisdom. Your freedom. Your true human life. This is hearing the call of heaven.

I hope you hear it.

This is the Moment of Freedom

What we have done in the past creates our present moment. We can't go back and change anything. The future is out of reach. We cannot predict what will happen. But we can act right now. This is the only moment we have. This is the moment of freedom.