

MARTIAL ARTS METAPHORS: LESSONS FOR LIVING

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This article proposes that metaphors of personal integrity and systemic harmony derived from the Martial Arts can be utilized to promote personal growth, peace, and a philosophical basis for living a full life. Before we begin this venture, let me point out that you do not need to be a martial artist to attain these insights or use these metaphors. Many of these ideas are common to all fields of human excellence and consciousness development. Nevertheless, there are extra philosophical colorings that derive from the personal and spiritual struggles that emanate from a combative model of conflict into confluence.

While these insights or lessons are not exclusive to martial arts experience, they are common to serious practitioners of these arts with 5 or more dedicated years of experience in diligent physical practice and contemplative thought. It is possible to be a good fighter in the martial arts and avoid these lessons, but this limited technique-and-conquer mind-set is rare among the masters that go beyond the 2nd dan level. To the masters of the art await the treasures of consciousness and philosophy that make the practice of the art a meditation of daily living. But before we begin our journey together into this realm, perhaps we should best define our terms:

OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

1. **MARTIAL ARTS** are skills of self-defence using primarily unarmed or minimally armed (weapon range less than 2 metres) strategies and skills. We are focusing mostly on those derived primarily from Japan, China, and The Orient for their practical effectiveness and especially for their spiritual foundations.
2. **METAPHOR** is an indirect stating of a concept or principle using a story or image that compels the imagination of the listener into reframing a life situation.

Martial arts experience and practice lead to meditative and focusing states in which metaphors for the reframing of daily living are compellingly attractive and adaptive. Following our outline, let's see how this unfolds.

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A. CREATING A CONTEXT OF OPEN-MINDED LEARNING

1. **Clearing the Mind.** All martial arts sessions begin with a ritual to set us apart from the world outside and resume a path of discovery of inner potential. Mu-Shin or Empty-mindedness is attained by a period of brief meditation at the beginning and end of every session. For about 2 minutes, all participants close their eyes, focus on their breathing, and clear extraneous thoughts to narrow their attention to the learning theme of the session.
2. **Beginner's Mind.** Clearing presuppositions and assumptions about the world and the nature of reality, the 10th degree black belt once again wears the white, or beginner's belt. This act of humility indicates the wisdom of beginning again with an open mind. You cannot learn Zen when your mind is filled with your own opinions, attitudes, and habits of thought. The true student, as well as the enlightened teacher or sensei or sifu, aspires to the ideal "Hear like an echo, see like a mirror." There are several stories that come to mind to express this concept.

The first has to do with an impatient American wealthy industrialist who came to Japan to learn the inner peace that arises from Zen philosophy. Repeatedly, he tried to gain the audience of the Zen master, only to be rebuffed. Eventually he was received by the Master, who insisted that they engage in the ritual Tea Ceremony reserved for such meetings of esteemed people. While the Master whisked the tea and rotated the brims of the ceremonial cups, then started pouring the tea, the visitor was almost scalded by the very hot tea overflowing from his cup onto his lap. Jumping up to his feet, the would-be Zen student said "What are you doing?"

The Master said: "You have come all these miles to learn about Zen. You are so full of your own ideas. Your cup of ideas is full! There is no room for fresh learning. Come back when you have emptied your cup. Then your lessons can begin!"

The second story describes the situation of a proud young fellow who arrived at a Zen monastery with a very beautifully carved ornate bowl that had been designed by his ancestors. The chief monk looked at this masterpiece of art and said, "Very pretty, but do you really truly want to become a Zen monk, renouncing attachment to desire?" The student repeatedly protested that he wanted to learn Zen more than anything else in the world. After several exchanges of the student's declaration of intent, the Master took a hammer and shattered the bowl, with the words "Very well then. Here is some glue. Glue the pieces back together. Then you will be ready to be a monk, with a proper and humble beggar's bowl. Now you can begin the work of enlightenment!" The preferred posture for learning is not that of ego or vanity; rather it is open, balanced, peaceful, and receptive.

If you think that these stories exist only in the world of Zen monasteries, consider this more contemporary scene. Have you ever washed your car in the spring when the snow is melting on the road? Notice that as you drive your spotlessly clean car down the road, you delicately avoid puddles of slush, and avoid the splashes of oncoming traffic. The painstaking care that you exercise almost always takes away from the joy of driving, until finally you get splashed. Then the spell of perfectionism and cleanliness is finally broken, the struggle is now resolved, and you resume the enjoyment of driving normally.

The lessons are clear. Let it go. Clear your plate. Stop trying to hold it together with the bonds of control. Create a quiet and curious space for learning. As the jazz musician said, "God exists in the space between the notes."

3. **Structure and Clarity of Roles.** Teacher–student, leader-follower, are useful roles in the learning process, and can be reversed as the student progresses beyond the master. The martial arts are hierarchically organized to facilitate the acceptance of the roles that enable the learning process, and to clarify role shifts as they occur or are requested.
4. **Social Contract of Mutual Respect.** Bowing Rituals prevail in most acts of engagement in the martial arts. When we enter the dojo or exercise hall, we always bow to announce our respect for an authority of shared knowledge and wisdom greater than our own. This practice arises from the architecture of temples where the roofs and doors were so low that they forced all people who entered to lower their heads, an act of humility and respect to a higher order than individual greatness and ego.

Bowing to your opponent also occurs before and after each practice engagement with that partner. As you bow, in effect you are saying to your partner "If you ever wanted the perfect time to hit me with a cheap shot, now is the time because my head is bowed forward and vulnerable. But if we both come out of the bow without incident, we are making a contract of mutual respect, honor, and integrity. As mutual participants we are in skill opposed, in spirit united. Your body is respected as an extension of mine as we endeavor to master but not destroy. We are connected in a united ecosystem of passion and philosophy. Although we are engaged in a win-lose paradigm, the underlying social contract is win-win. We bow to a higher order of ethics in our shared love of the martial arts, and we bow to each other as its mutual adherents.

B. NARROWING THE FOCUS TO WHAT IS RELEVANT

1. **Exact Focus allows us to break through obstacles** to penetrate the illusory barriers of life to realize opportunity and vision. Precise focus allows us to care about ourselves and our living systems while we mould and transform external and internal realities.

The greatest test is breaking through our own fears. Much of this discipline is counter-intuitive, in that we need to approach and embrace our fears in order to manage them. We create the art of the impossible, and enter The Eye of the Tiger, the centre of our worst fears, to discover an astounding zone of peace where we least expected it. That is, when we focus entirely on the Eternal Now there is no past to regret, nor is there future to fear. Our mind is entirely one with our actions. The present moment is our provisional reality, the only relevant reality in our flow, and we use this platform as if it were the only reality at all. Also, we learn how to absorb a hit without cowering or flinching, until finally we realize we are liberated from the paralysis of fear. We can still feel fear, but we can respond assertively, rather than react under fear's influence, when faced with a challenging situation.

2. **Ki or Chi is a sense of Guiding Internal Spirit that overrides all considerations.** This spirit is both fierce and compassionate. Its ultimate expression is the mystical "Moment of Truth" when your body operates totally unconsciously with lightening speed to produce a beautiful moment of Pure Flow, an ecstatic time of awe and spiritual rapture. Ki and its development are assisted by rituals and acts that focus subjective reality.

Dissociation from ordinary reality. Obstacles such as pain, fear, limitations, doubts, are left behind by the setting of context through ritual and extraordinary focusing experiences. The Sanchin or Breathing Kata and the "Kiai" power-

shout that represents **the meeting of the spirits** exemplify powerful techniques to block out external reality and narrow focus into the here-and-now of our present context and our purpose within it.

C. OTHER FOCUSING ASPECTS OF THE MARTIAL ARTS

1. **Affirmation of the Positive.** Similar to the Yes-set Induction in hypnosis, we focus on the technique of the impossible, such as putting a straw through a potato in one stroke. This demonstration is a layman's version of the breaking of boards or smashing through ice seen in theatrical demonstrations of the power of focus. At a more philosophical level, in life we can use what I call the **Principle of Inevitability** to affirm an outcome that we envision, but we do not insist that it **must** happen, merely that it **will** happen. Thus we keep the required intensity and focus, without the attendant fuss and bluster that distract ourselves and others from our mission.
2. **Repetition and the Boredom Barrier.** The highly meditative alpha and theta states are induced by the sheer weight of millions of repetitions of basic movements until they are totally instinctive. Meanwhile the learning process itself induces altered states of consciousness and quasi-mystical states by virtue of its requirement of mind-numbing repetition of a kinetic action mantra. That is, the analytic thinking associated with beta rapid brainwaves is blocked, forcing the induction of hypnotic alpha and even theta deep trance states.
- 3.. **Kinetic Meditation of Connectedness.** Like other forms of dance and rhythmic motion, the Martial Arts engage a sense of aesthetics of balance in motion. As this motion is in response with real and imagined opponents, the meditation extends beyond ego and includes a profound sense of connectedness with ourselves, our opponents, our group, our community, nature, and the universe.

D. BUSHIDO: THE WARRIOR'S CODE

1. **The Suffix “-do” is an ethos that is a blueprint for a philosophy of life for its practitioners.** The practices of judo, aikido, bushido etc., have the suffix –do to indicate a way of being. This way of thinking and its corresponding codes of morality and action gradually acquire a guiding and automatic “life of their own” that, at least in theory if not in practice, guide every breath we take. From a constructivist solution-focused model, the world is appreciated calmly from a perspective of opening patterns of possibility.
2. **The Martial Arts are indeed arts.** There is adherence to pure form or method. All action is based on a substrate of applied biomechanics. That is, if the technique is practically ineffective, it is not worth learning. Thus, in many martial arts there is frequent emphasis on Kata or prearranged forms of practice, so that the building blocks of classical method can be thoroughly mastered and understood. As in art and music, technical method leads to strategic linkage and synthesis, and finally artistic expression. Only then can elaboration, improvisation, adaptation, and the creation of personal style be effective. Still, “No one may enter the hall of mastery without the key of pure form.” This guideline

means that classical form or method must still be the platform underlying the surface of personal style and creative flair.

3. **Mindfulness** and every-moment-Zen awareness are essential to the vision and perspective of the Martial Arts. Earlier we outlined the mantra-like repetition of practice to go beyond the limitations of the analytic mind. However, even in these many repetitions, we remain aware of our movement and our surroundings, especially the interaction feedback loops between ourselves and our opponents, so that we are still alertly present and observing ourselves and our surroundings in the spirit of calm reflection and appreciation.

4. **Conflict Into Confluence.** Many of the Martial Arts emphasize flexibility, pliability, gentleness, and harmony in dealing with both internal and external field forces or seemingly conflicting trends. The martial arts of Aikido (the way of harmony) and Judo (the way of gentleness or flexibility) particularly utilize this principle of moving with field forces that are impinging upon us.

Force that could harm us is not merely neutralized. When we actively join its energy with our own, we amplify that power in confluence to create startlingly powerful outcomes. The image of the empty paper cup demonstrates this principle. Although the cup itself is light and frail, when you push it around with your finger, it gives way and moves out of the way so that it is not crushed. When two fingers push at it from opposite sides, it spins out of the middle, allowing the two fingers to meet each other with the cup standing by on the outside of the conflict, rather than being crushed by it. Thus the paper cup models **formal integrity with spatial flexibility**, a key dimension of the flexible martial arts.

5. **Patience, Discipline, and Persistence arise from a doctrine of Acceptance.** Acceptance is a global concept of humility in regarding our limitations as well as our strengths, and acceptance of life as it is, rather than as we would like it to insist that it should be. This spirit can apply in situations that are unfair, or where strong power differentials make it seem that our efforts will not prevail. Yet this form of acceptance is far from passive, and actions arising from it are often powerful in the expression of personal spiritual integrity. **Acceptance is the surrender of attachment to desire while maintaining personal purpose.** There are stories of patient but persistent change produced by an attitude of quiet firmness, and its accompanying spirit of fierce courage.

One such story involved the general of a conquering army insisting total allegiance of all the citizens to the new occupation political regime. Most of the citizens complied, except one silent monk meditating under a tree. The general dismounted from his horse, and with all his armor and weaponry towered over the little monk. He bellowed in a loud and angry voice, "Do you know who **I** am? Do you realize that **I** could decide at will to raise **my** sword and cut off **your** head, without blinking my eye?"

In a steady and quiet regard of compassion, the monk nodded slowly and replied, "And do you know who **I** am? Do you realize that **I** could have you decide at will to raise your sword and cut off **my** head without blinking **my** eye?"

The courage of this monk, choosing an opportunity of acceptance and spiritual integrity, and even a potential coaching or teaching moment with this arrogant general, exercised a spirit of detachment in the practice of life. That is, even at the risk of potential death, this monk chose to follow a path of mutual enlightenment by asserting his compassion and acceptance of the situation, rather than collapse under the weight of its power differential. Here, truly, is an example of courage in acceptance. Socrates said "Practice dying." In the Martial Arts, we indeed do this symbolically many times in each training session, thus participating in an experience of acceptance, rebirth, and symbolic immortality of spirit.

6. **Understanding is only a step toward Realization.** Understanding acknowledges that a principle in theory could apply in reality, maybe for somebody else, but not necessarily in my life. Realization is the convincing belief based on evidence in application that this principle can and **does apply effectively in my life**. Once this realization has occurred, the possibility of peace, joy, and enlightenment become more attainable and practical.

7. **The Circle of Life becomes a Spiral.** Linear time becomes a circular recursive concept, as all lines of opposition are transformed into circles that reflect upon each other. Let me expand that sentence. Instead of the notion that time is a linear sequence of events, consider that time is a circle that orbits over itself in a spiral. Thus, when we think we are back to square 1, we are actually experiencing square 101. We are not quite replicating an experience we have had before; we are in fact elaborating that experience with our revisiting its circumstances and our developing skills. Thus our life view reflects a systemic idea of a reality that folds upon itself. This insight can lead to adaptive ways of functioning in post-modern constructions of social and global life connectedness. Other applications derived from this philosophy are that underneath the maya or illusion of separateness is the implicate order of unity in a holographic universe. In a hologram, each instance reflects a microcosm of the whole it represents. As such, each of our individual actions at a moment in time can represent and shape the experience of our evolution as a species. This phenomenon can be represented by the “Butterfly Effect” in which the beating of the wings of a butterfly can amplify in resonance so that a powerful wind blows somewhere else in the world. There are many examples in physics and other spheres of life where strange attractors and other examples of congruencies or resonances combine and amplify their effects in demonstrations of quantum or chaos theory. These lessons are also inherent in the mutual or group practice of the Martial Arts, as we experience and combine synergy of action. Furthermore, in this practice, the adherents often go beyond the illusion of the individual ego as the emergent self of Flow becomes a vessel of expression of this unity.

E.. APPLICATIONS IN GUIDING OTHERS TO A MORE COMPLETE LIFE

Many of the spiritual understandings derived from the experience and practice of the Martial Arts can be powerful metaphors for the reframing of life stories and the incorporation of frameworks that encourage peace and transcendence of life adversities. There are many ways to refer to the collective wisdom of the warrior archetype, whether or not you or your client or friend has had any direct exposure to the Martial Arts. Here are some suggested applications:

1. Learn and explore the application of these lessons **with those who have experienced the Martial Arts**. Obviously, the lessons of the Martial Arts extend beyond the dojo and become a way of life and a guiding philosophy for its practitioners. Even if you yourself do not share this background, you can discuss these principles and wonder with your client whether they have valid application in reframing their life narrative story. You can have them go back into the trance of their martial art as a naturalistic utilization of a well-rehearsed induction, and then have them feel these principles applying in trance and beyond.

2. **With those with no Martial Arts experience, use vicarious identification with the Inner Warrior archetype.** Since many media such as television and movies render depictions of these actions and principles, you could have a client with no direct experience imagine what it might be like to be a Warrior, and get in touch with their Inner Warrior, instead of identifying their Inner Worrier.

3. **Cultivate in your own mind an appreciation of the utility of conflict.** Many counselors or personal coaches wish to avoid metaphors that invoke the concept of conflict. Particularly, many feminists would rather bypass the traps of conflict and use metaphors of joining and collaboration. However, such metaphors of incorporation and joining can be integrated in a model that has the dynamic of conflict. Researchers in stress management have talked about the need for some sense of opposition or struggle or the challenge of positive stress in order for growth and resiliency to be developed. Researchers in creativity, flow, and happiness have also cited the need to simulate or generate some kind of challenge dynamic to generate flow states.

4. **Encourage the model of Conflict into Confluence.** In imagery fantasy and simulation, have your clients imagine their opponent's objective, then use their opponents force in congruency with your client's signature strengths to generate a win-win whereby their opponents now become their allies, and they come to understand some of the benefit and even benevolence in their former adversary. At a bare minimum, they come to have some empathy, compassion, and acceptance of their former foe. A corporate example is a technology firm that drops its lawsuit for copyright infringement on an encroaching competitor by making that competitor company into a licensed manufacturer of a similar product, a mutual win for both companies.

5. **Forgiveness is largely self-forgiveness; acceptance is largely self-acceptance; trust is ultimately self-trust.** As your client comes to see that much of the misery of life is generated by attachment to desire, have your client or friend forgive themselves for falling into the illusion that we are all separate, and then promote metaphors of cooperation and integration of shadows and opposite parts of the self. Rejoice with your clients as they grow in integration and transpersonal ways of seeing humanity and their role in the evolution of our collective consciousness.^{2[2]}

Summary. This article proposes that metaphors of personal integrity and systemic harmony derived from the Martial Arts can be utilized to promote personal growth, peace, and a philosophical basis for living a full life.

The outline begins with the creation of a context of clearing the mind to make space for learning and insight. We also observe roles and rituals of conduct to create a social learning contract of mutual respect and integrity. Focus and spirit allow us to break through life obstacles and internal barriers to create new realities. Affirmations of the positive and kinetic meditations about connectedness use the principle of inevitability to bring forth the fulfillment of our goals. Mindfulness, discipline and persistence are essential to the warrior's code of honor and way of living. Formal integrity is fortified by postural and spatial flexibility. Conflict is blended into the confluence of aligned forces. Patience and compassion arise from acceptance. Acceptance is the surrender of attachment to desire while maintaining personal purpose. Living this way through applying these principles allows us to experience the circle of life as a spiral of spiritual connectedness with the evolving mind of the universe.

By combining conflict into confluence martial arts metaphors can form a philosophical code for living a life promoting both passion and peace.

Note: Dr. Young will be conducting an experiential workshop incorporating these principles at the Banff Conference of Canadian Society of Clinical Hypnosis, April 2004.

