A close-up photograph of a person's hand and forearm holding a katana. The hand is wrapped in a dark, textured grip. The katana has a long, curved blade with a visible edge. The background is dark, and the lighting highlights the textures of the wood and metal.

PHILOSOPHY OF FIGHTING

Morals and Motivations
of the Modern Warrior

Keith Vargo

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PREFACE

The Way of the Warrior column, which first appeared in *Black Belt* and is collected in this book, covers a variety of topics in the martial arts. But there is one theme running through all of them, a kind of exceptionalism. The martial arts are athletic, but they are more than sports. They are arts, but they are unlike any other art we have. They are about fighting, but they are about more than fighting. What we have in the martial arts is a unique intersection of practical skills, moral paradox, mysticism and self-expression. My writing is about exploring this.

The columns in this book were written in a number of different places. Some were written in the small Pennsylvania steel town where I grew up and lived for many years. Others were written in the various other places I've been lucky enough to live: a foggy port city on the coast of Hokkaido in Japan, a college town in Appalachia, the metropolis of Tokyo, and even a hamlet in the middle of Finland where I hid from myself for a couple of years.

Living in those places influenced everything written in this book. That college town mentioned above is Radford, Virginia, and the university there had the only college-level martial arts program in the United States. I went through that program with an ambitious and diverse group of martial artists. Confronting and understanding their different points of view was the beginning of my writing. Likewise, training and fighting in Japan brought me into contact with a different culture and different kinds of martial artists. Some are professional mixed-martial arts fighters and kickboxers. Others practice more traditional martial arts, like *kyudo* and *iaido*. Their differing motivations and the sense of meaning they derive from the fighting arts inspired many of these columns.

Over the years, the *Black Belt* staff has been kind, patient and supportive. I'd like to thank the many editors who have helped make the final version of my columns much better than the copy I gave them. In particular, I'd like to thank *Black Belt's* managing editor Ed Pollard for his editing and his long patience with last-minute submissions. Also, I want to thank book editor Sarah Dzida for putting this project together, as well as putting up with my questions and suggestions during the process. But most of all, I want to thank executive editor Robert W. Young for giving me the chance to write for *Black Belt*. Without him, these columns

would've never happened.

Finally, I want to thank my mother, Kathy Vargo. She encouraged and expected me to follow my interests as far as they'd take me. Looking back at the past decade through these columns, I'm more grateful for that than I have words for.

—Keith Vargo
2008

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WHY ARE SO MANY FIGHTERS AFRAID TO LOSE?

February 1998

Professional fighters hate having losses on their records. They hate it so much that they sometimes spend years away from the ring to preserve an unblemished record. What's more, they also have been known to conveniently forget to mention losses in one type of competition when fighting in another.

Maurice Smith, for instance, may be the current giant killer of no-holds-barred fighting, but not many people in the United States know that he got whooped pretty badly a few times in *pancrase* competition in Japan, losing to a grappler at least twice in less than five minutes.

For athletes in other sports, a loss is a minor setback. But two or three losses could mean the end of a fighter's career because fight fans and promoters are notoriously fickle. We want to see only fights between invincible titans and unbeatable martial arts heroes. When one makes his living by fighting, appearing mortal is bad for business.

But why is this so? What makes fighting sports so different from other sports?

I believe the difference lies in what the fans think a loss means. Basketball and football fans easily forgive losing streaks because they are just games, tests of how well one handles the ball and gets it into a hoop or end zone. Teams and players can easily stage comebacks in these sports. But all fighters are afraid to lose (with the possible exception of the Ultimate Fighting Championship's David "Tank" Abbott, who is afraid only of being anonymous) because professional fighting is about risking one's life. It seems that great fighters are like demigods in our minds: Once they lose, they are banished from Mount Olympus and become mortal like the rest of us.

This analogy is not as far from the truth as you may think. What fans tune in to see is symbolic of a life-and-death struggle. In less compassionate times, a loser lost his life and a winner was elevated to the status of a local deity. Winning a series of "death matches" made it seem like the fighter had power over Death itself (like the warrior Bhishma in the Indian epic, *Mahabharata*). Back then, fights were more like contests of magic than of physical skill.

Incidentally, this ancient view of the martial arts as a kind of "protection magic" explains much of the arts' quasi-religious character. It is the reason people cling so desperately to classroom etiquette and spend a lifetime looking for pure, unadulterated *kata* (forms). It is a remnant of

the primitive mind, the idea that “like begets like”: The more closely one imitates an invincible legend, the more like that legend he becomes. So the original purpose of the martial arts’ fierce discipline was as a means of “stealing magic.” (But that is another essay entirely. ...)

It doesn’t matter that modern kickboxing and no-holds-barred events are relatively safe. The unconscious attitude toward pro fighting is that losing equals dying. It’s no wonder that fighters try very hard to remain—or at least appear—undefeated. It’s hard to stage a comeback when your fans have already buried you.

Fighting sports will never be like other sports. More people may die while playing football than while fighting in no-holds-barred events. But football and other sports will never have the aura of danger and brutality that professional fights do. It is only in the ring or the octagon that the goal is to break another man’s body. It is only here that we confront that most awesome and humbling of enemies—mortality. Can we blame anyone for fighting against this?

WHAT REALLY WORKS, ANYWAY?

March 1998

Martial artists love to argue about the martial arts. Subjects range from the true lineage of kung fu styles to the meaning of movements in *kata* to which fighters got robbed by judges’ decisions. We have these same arguments over and over again—as many patient wives and girlfriends know—and we always enjoy them. But what martial artists really like to argue about is which techniques or styles “really work.”

This is always a subject of debate because what really works is always changing. Certain arts become popular as they “beat” other arts by exploiting their weaknesses in competitions. Then, as people learn more about the new, dominant style, they discover its weaknesses and use them against it.

We’ve seen this time and again in the martial arts. At one time, the heavyweight boxing champion of the world was considered the baddest man on the planet. Then Muhammad Ali got his legs stomped so badly by wrestler Antonio Inouke that he had to be hospitalized. That’s when leg-kicking arts like *kyokushin* karate and *muay Thai* kickboxing came into vogue. Then, when karate fighters and kickboxers were getting spanked on a regular basis by Brazilian *jiu-jitsu* fighters, grappling became golden.

Now we live in the time of the “jujutsu killer.” It’s the time of boxer/wrestler Don Frye, who wiped the mat with jujutsu champ Amaury Bitteti, and *pancrase* fighter Yoshiki Takahashi, who upset Carlson Gracie disciple Wallid Ishmael. But most of all, it’s the time of converted kickboxer Maurice Smith, who tore up one big-name grappler after another.

All this provides ample material for arguments about what really works. What it doesn’t do is stop some boneheads from dismissing all other arts because theirs happens to be on top at the moment. Few things are more frustrating than the true believer who sees only the strong points of his own art and the weak points of all others.

It doesn’t matter what you’re talking about; you just can’t argue with these guys. If the true believer practices karate or kung fu, he dismisses the achievements of jujutsu fighters because they don’t have to worry about eye jabs, bites and groin kicks when they fight. If he practices Brazilian jiu-jitsu, he minimizes the losses of jujutsu fighters by saying the defeated were “just tournament-jujutsu champs” (as though that were a small achievement). If you try to argue these points, the true believer will either treat you like you’re retarded or challenge you to a fight.

I believe the whole point of arguing about the martial arts is to broaden our mind and make our arts better. So I don’t understand people who turn a blind eye to their own art’s weaknesses. Sure, eye-jabbing is a powerful self-defense technique, but any karate or kung fu man who hasn’t learned how to deal with a grappler is just asking to get whooped.

Likewise, jujutsu fighters *do* lose to stand-up fighters who’ve learned how to deal with them. So they, too, have to look honestly at their art’s weaknesses and adapt.

I learned my lessons about clearly seeing an art’s strengths and weaknesses from a kung fu teacher. When he was young, he traveled around southern China and fought many challenge matches with other masters. During our lessons, he would demonstrate how he had beaten opponents from other styles with certain techniques. He never named names, but it was clear to us that he was talking about *wing chun* kung fu.

In spite of this, you could not lure him into saying anything bad about wing chun. He was adamant about saying good things about other styles and using the martial arts to forge friendships. Part of this was simply Chinese social grace. But part of his attitude stemmed from his experience. Even though he had never lost to a wing chun fighter, he knew that style had won challenge matches. His strength as a teacher and a fighter came from clearly seeing the strengths of other arts and learning how to

overcome them.

So what does really work? Well, like Bruce Lee said, that's something we all have to figure out for ourselves. But figuring it out involves thought and argument. Fighting out every disagreement is for apes, and blind faith in anything—much less a martial art—is no help at all.

Personally, I think the only martial arts worth studying are weapons arts, karate or kung fu styles that hold full-contact competitions, grappling arts that focus on good ground-fighting skills and kickboxing. Some of you may disagree. Good. That's an excellent place to start.

WHERE HAS ALL THE JEET KUNE DO GONE?

April 1998

J*eeet kune do* is the martial arts ideal. It is made up of the best techniques from all other arts and held together by the insights and writings of the late, great Bruce Lee. In theory, it is the ultimate martial art. But in today's world of full-contact, no-holds-barred fights, how does jeet kune do stack up?

Actually, Lee's followers have fared better than most martial arts competitors. Jeet kune do has produced some good amateur boxers and pro kickboxers, and jeet kune do's best-known no-holds-barred fighter, Erik Paulson, has made some respectable showings. The curious thing is that the "ultimate martial art" doesn't dominate these types of competition. Or does it?

If you define Lee's art by the techniques and concepts he used, then just about every great fighter of the past 30 years is a jeet kune do man, even if he never studied the art. Undefeated kickboxing champ Bill Wallace always fought with his strong side forward (as Lee taught), and giant-killer Maurice Smith uses a similar type of upright stance to defeat grapplers. In addition, no-holds-barred fighters like Vitor Belfort, Marco Ruas and Bas Rutten easily flow from kicking to punching to grappling—which is a goal of many jeet kune do disciples. In other words, these men have no real connection to Lee or his art, yet they look like the jeet kune do ideal.

It seems that Lee's real strength was in recognizing and appropriating superior techniques and strategies. Even today, great fighters still use methods advocated by Lee because they are, and probably always have been, the best way to fight in a given circumstance. Today's fighters may not know or care about jeet kune do, but they will always look like Lee

disciples because they will inevitably come to the same conclusions about fighting that he did.

Some people are a little uncomfortable with this. Heavyweight kickboxing champ Joe Lewis is a perfect example. He was the only truly dominant fighter to have studied directly with Lee, but when you attend his seminars, you can feel the tension whenever someone concentrates too much on Lee's effect on his career. Lewis will talk about how Lee helped him develop blistering speed with his jab/backfist and then remind the audience that he was a successful strong-side-forward fighter before he met Lee. Lewis will also talk about the strategies he learned from Lee, then remind people that he also learned a lot while stationed in Okinawa or while training in California boxing gyms.

Some fighters, like Lewis, may believe that jeet kune do people have monopolized successful strategies and techniques. Lee is definitely the best-known martial artist of the past 50 years, and it's easy to argue that the people he took techniques from actually performed them better than he did (consider Muhammad Ali's jab vs. jeet kune do's independent-motion jab).

But fame alone is not enough to develop the following that jeet kune do has. I believe that it is Lee's deep insights into what is enduring and valuable in the martial arts that keep his art alive today. Everyone who fights eventually learns what is valuable and real. But it takes a philosopher to make sense of it all for the rest of us.

A TASTE OF IMMORTALITY

May 1998

“What is the greatest wonder?”

“Each day death strikes, yet we live as though we were immortal.”

—The *Mahabharata*

Much of what we learn in the martial arts is of questionable value. In traditional arts, we spend years learning *kata* (forms) that we don't understand and mastering archaic weapons that we will never use. Even the self-satisfied no-holds-barred fighters must wonder sometimes exactly how often they'll have to tackle someone and beat the tar out of him in everyday life. In fact, considering their limited practical value, it's surprising the arts don't just shrivel up and die.

It may be surprising, but that is the way it is. The martial arts just won't go away. People who practice traditional Asian arts are often more devoted to these anachronisms than they are to their family. And no-holds-barred fighters go out of their way to risk their life in fights that many Americans would like to see banned. Why is this so? What do people get from the fighting arts that makes them so devoted?

I believe the answer is clear: What practitioners get from the martial arts is a taste of immortality. Winning fights, training in a centuries-old art and trying to achieve union with some eternal ideal through ritual practice of the martial arts are all hedges against death. We all know we will die someday, and at the same time, we all find ways to feel like we will live forever. That is exactly what the martial arts do for us.

I'm sure that many no-rules fighters would scoff at these assumptions, saying they fight just because they "like to fight." But that is a nonanswer. (Saying you like to fight doesn't explain *why* you like to fight.) If they reflect on those moments when they win, I'm certain they will see that they are more guilty than anyone else of wanting to feel immortal. Think of it. These fighters brazenly challenge Death head-on. They enter tournaments where they fight the most dangerous men on the planet with very little regulation. When they win, they have won more than a simple test of skill. They have beaten the Grim Reaper in his own house.

Intellectually, we all know that the loser just got beat up and will recover to fight again another day. But we feel the primitive truth of it in our gut. In a different time, there really were no rules, and the loser would have been killed. So it's natural for the winner to feel like Death can't touch him.

I imagine this is the way it has always been. Centuries ago, successful fighters were more than just skilled athletes. They were warrior-saints. They were men who had gained power over Death itself by being unbeatable in battle. So schools developed around them, and disciples emulated them in every detail in order to gain that supernatural power. Sure, they learned martial skills, but more important, they practiced in the "style" of their saint. They learned his secret rituals and mantras. They engraved his sacred symbols on their weapons and prayed to his gods. They did what traditional martial artists still do today: They tried to become identical with the deathless truth "behind" a great master's technique.

This is probably the reason most people stay in the martial arts for any length of time. They want to transcend their mere human form—and the merely human skill of fighting—by becoming identical with some eternal ideal, like Lao Tzu's *Tao* or a Buddhist heaven. No matter how many tradi-

tional martial artists get stomped into the ground—and thus symbolically killed—by no-holds-barred fighters, people still remain devoted to purely ritual arts because they feel identical with something eternal. They are centuries removed from the actual life-and-death struggles that made their art, so winning or losing is incidental to them. The martial idea is deathless and eternal. That is their taste of immortality.

MIND, MATTER AND THE MARTIAL ARTS

June 1998

In the past, I have written several essays that were critical of the mysticism that often accompanies martial arts instruction. But this criticism is a bit of a smoke screen. As much as I dismiss silly notions like the power of *chi* (internal energy) and the effectiveness of death touches, I do cherish certain esoteric ideas about the martial arts.

I believe, however, that anything truly magical in the martial arts will be found through the study of perception and consciousness.

What is true about the human body now has always been true. No one has ever been able to discharge energy from his or her hand like a stun gun, and no one ever will. The gross physical action of the martial arts is forever the same. We simply use our limbs or pieces of metal and wood to break other people's bodies and win fights.

What has changed drastically over time, though, is how we see the world and how we think about it.

Many times in many different Asian cultures, warriors have experienced a shift in awareness because of the demands of battle. Fighting hand to hand with blades required a highly accurate, hair-trigger response. The human being's reflective consciousness had no place in this warrior's world. He needed a lack of consciousness or a "loss of self." He needed to lose the distinction between self and other so that his actions were identical with his enemy's. Blocking and countering a cut from an expert swordsman required that a warrior move at the same time as his enemy and in exactly the right way. He had to "become one with his enemy."

This may not sound very glamorous, but it's a lot more substantial than any chi trick. If it is true that martial artists in previous times could act at virtually the same time as their opponent, it amounts to glimpsing the future. The martial artist would have to see what an opponent was doing, judge whether it was a direct attack or a fake, and then respond correctly

before the enemy had completely committed to slashing him.

But how is this possible?

First, I don't know if it was—or is—possible. Second, if it is possible, explaining this glimpse of the future requires a better understanding of brain science and quantum physics than I possess.

But I pose the question because it is a tantalizing one. The gross physical action of the martial arts may remain forever the same, but the microphysics of how the human brain works is a bit harder to pin down. And if the universe is all one “thing” at the sub-quantum level, maybe time and distance can be circumvented when we “lose the self.” We may be able to act at the same time an opponent does because, on some level, there may be no difference between his intentions and our attention.

All this may seem a little far-fetched, and perhaps it is. This essay may only prove that I don't really understand the frontiers of science. But if there is anything truly magical about the martial arts, I believe it will be found on these frontiers. Forget the spoon-bending and fire-walking of self-proclaimed chi masters. Trust those fleeting moments on the practice floor when you perform flawlessly and go from there.

FIGHTING THE GENDER DOUBLE STANDARD

July 1998

Everyone has his or her pet peeve. Mine happens to be the different ways aggressive men and women are viewed. Aggressive men are seen as examples of everything that is wrong with men. In fact, it has almost become a reflex to look down on men who enjoy conflict and competition. Aggressive women, on the other hand, are seen as an oppressed group finally taking charge and exercising their right to be angry. In other words, male aggression is oppressive and evil. But female aggression is justice, an example of positive social change.

A good example of this is a scene I witnessed in a local pub. I was there with some guys from my karate club and their girlfriends. One of the karate guys was clearly more interested in a girl at the next table, who was not his girlfriend. The more he flirted with this other girl, the angrier his girlfriend became. When she couldn't take it any longer, she stood up and marched toward the exit. The karate guy immediately started apologizing as he got up and followed her to the door; whereupon she wheeled around, slapped him with all her might and read him the riot act.

At the time, I thought this was funny. We all did. But the more I thought about it, the more it bothered me. We all thought it was OK for her to slap him because he was flirting with another girl. But if their positions were reversed, we would not have been so sympathetic. If the karate guy had slapped his girlfriend for flirting with another guy, we would have considered it criminal.

This is an important point to consider because the martial arts are all about aggression. They are about how to be aggressive and when it is right or wrong to do so. Clearly, our views on gender determine what is right or wrong more than the teachings of any ancient master. The first principle of nearly every martial art is that it is wrong for anyone to lash out in anger. But in the real world, women are almost encouraged to do just that.

The reason we accept this double standard is that we don't take female aggression seriously. On average, women are smaller and weaker than men. When they lash out in anger, they usually don't do much damage. This is why we laughed when the karate guy got slapped. His girlfriend's aggression was a joke to us.

But this really is more a matter of gender than size and strength. The karate guy mentioned above is a lot taller and stronger than his girlfriend. But if a man who was the same height and weight as the girlfriend had cuffed him like that, we would have accepted—or even expected—a retaliatory strike. Likewise, if a 6-foot, 200-pound woman smashed some pip-squeak guy in the face, we wouldn't care, except maybe to feel sorry for him because he got beat up by a girl. But if that same pip-squeak returned the favor to his amazon attacker, we would look down on him (How could he hit a woman?). It's a really curious social norm: If you're a man, your aggression is taken seriously, regardless of your size and strength; but if you're a woman, your aggression is never taken seriously.

Both men and women should be upset by this double standard. They should be upset because it implies that men are born oppressors and women are born victims. When a man lashes out in anger, it is assault. But a woman can only express her attitude—because she is assumed to be powerless. If we accept this as true, our involvement in the martial arts is for nothing. If women are born victims, no amount of martial arts training will make a difference in their life. And if men are born oppressors, no amount of discipline and insight will keep us from acting like evil apes.

But I don't believe either of these is true.

The martial arts are based on the idea that knowledge is the great equalizer. It makes bad people good and weak people strong. We may be stuck

with the body and gender we were born with, but we don't have to accept their limitations—or the expectations of others.

WHY WRESTLING IS NOT A MARTIAL ART

August 1998

There was a time when martial artists could ignore wrestlers. Wrestlers were mere athletes with no striking or submission skills, so we dismissed them as inferior fighters. But the advent of no-holds-barred fighting has taught us something. It has taught us that most wrestlers are only a few boxing and *jiu-jitsu* lessons away from beating most martial artists. In fact, wrestlers like Mark Coleman, Randy Couture and Mark Kerr are making a strong case for wrestling being the ultimate empty-hand skill.

In spite of this, wrestlers get no love from the martial arts community. Coleman, Kerr and Couture may fight more often and be more successful than most *jiu-jitsu* fighters, but karate and kung fu people have not and will not embrace them like they have the Gracies. Wrestlers may be great fighters, but they simply are not martial artists.

An art is defined as a “selective recreation of reality according to the artist’s value-judgments.” So a martial art is a selective recreation of the reality of fighting according to the fighter’s value-judgments. In other words, how you fight is determined by what is important to you.

The reason that wrestlers are not martial artists is that their skill is an end in itself. When a wrestler pins or suplexes an opponent, it is only about forcing his will on another man. That’s it. There is no larger world view in wrestling and certainly no value-judgments. Wrestling is pure technique, an amoral test of skill that is no better than rugby or football.

In contrast, the true martial arts are about something. Many Asian arts are expressions of a deep belief in the oneness of all things. Morihei Uyeshiba’s *aikido* and the ancient Japanese sword arts hold that victory is the result of physical training guided by the idea that time and distance are illusions. Other arts, like judo and *shotokan* karate, are expressions of 19th century idealism. They are designed to teach a certain lifestyle through the physical arts so that their practitioners can help build a utopian future. The point is that the men who created these martial arts tried to shape the reality of fighting according to what they thought was important—something larger than themselves.

Wrestlers don’t seem to understand this. They could beat every fighter

from every imaginable style, yet most martial artists would go on practicing karate or kung fu or jujutsu or whatever because wrestling is a philosophical dead end. It doesn't matter that many techniques of wrestling are almost identical to those of judo, *sambo*, *pancrase* and jiu-jitsu. When a wrestler triumphs in the octagon, it is a triumph of meaningless skill over our ideals.

Some people may be satisfied that this is simply the way it is, that fighting is a brutal pleasure that has no meaning. All they care about is who wins, with no consideration of how they won or what it means. They may be satisfied, but I'm not.

Art isn't about the way things are. It's about the way they *should be*. So a martial art isn't just about winning fights (although effective technique is the basis of any good martial art). An art is about the way fighting should be. In other words, Coleman is not a martial artist because he simply shows us the way things are: well-muscled athletes proving that the weak always lose to the strong. Royce Gracie, on the other hand, is a martial artist because he shows us the way things should be: a small man beating a larger, stronger opponent to prove that fighting can be a gentle (*jiu*) art (*jitsu*).

Can wrestling become a martial art?



Gichin Funakoshi (right) was a true martial artist because he designed *shotokan* karate to mold students into better citizens, not merely into better fighters.

I don't know. That depends on the wrestlers who currently rule the no-holds-barred world. If they can show us that wrestling is more than just cold skill, then it might surpass all the other contemporary martial arts in importance and popularity. But until then, martial artists will stay with the true martial arts. Aikido and *kenjutsu* people will continue to search for that special insight that dissolves the illusions of time and distance. Karate and judo people will go on trying to make the world a better place by teaching a "way of life" (*do*). But most of all, jiu-jitsu people will go on beating larger and stronger opponents, proving that Gracie was right when he said, "You don't have to be a monster to be the champ."

THE ROAD TO WISDOM

September 1998

In the December 1997 issue of *Karate/Kung Fu Illustrated*, I wrote an essay called "Nothing Risked, Nothing Gained." I argued that the deep wisdom of the martial arts is the result of fighting, winning and then coming to terms with what winning means. I also argued that people who practice noncompetitive, no-risk martial arts like *aikido* and *tai chi chuan* will never attain that wisdom. This offended a lot of readers and inspired some nasty criticism. This installment of *Way of the Warrior* is an answer to those criticisms.

First, most readers were offended because I specifically cited *tai chi* and *aikido* as no-risk martial arts that cannot lead to martial wisdom. I have to admit that this was a mistake on my part. It was unfair to single out those arts. There is nothing wrong with *aikido* and *tai chi* as such. The techniques of those arts are very much like the techniques of other arts, so they have just as much potential to be a vehicle of wisdom as any martial art.

Aikido and *tai chi* were singled out because those arts are universally praised for their spiritual benefits. Consequently, they attract more than their fair share of tender disciples who believe that fighting has nothing to do with wisdom. My goal in the "Nothing Risked, Nothing Gained" essay was not to slander *aikido* and *tai chi* or to minimize them; rather, it was to point out that this "ivory-tower attitude" toward competition and risk will make any martial art meaningless and useless.

I believe that the martial arts developed this way: A martial art begins as a simple, morally neutral fighting skill. It is an answer to the question, "What is the best way to fight?" and nothing more. It is only after one ac-



Competition and calculated risk in the training hall can help martial artists understand violence and defend against it.

quires skill and becomes dangerous that he *must* seek wisdom. Being able to hurt people quickly and easily requires a martial artist to have an acute sense of right and wrong. Otherwise, it is too easy to be ruled by anger and hate—and thus too easy to misuse one’s martial skills.

On the other hand, if a person has no fighting skills, if he is not able to hurt anyone, the ethics and insights learned in the training hall are empty. Power over another person is the prerequisite for granting mercy. This is why the pacifism of some martial artists seems wrong to me. It is noble for a person to want nothing to do with violence, but it is dangerous and stupid for a martial artist not to understand it thoroughly. Competition and calculated risk in the training hall are the best ways for martial artists to understand violence and defend themselves against it. Without fighting skills, all one learns in the *dojo* are empty words.

But acquiring a sense of right and wrong is not the “be-all and end-all” of martial wisdom. Some people pursue the truth of the martial arts with such intensity that it causes a shift in consciousness. This is what aikido founder Morihei Uyeshiba experienced, and it is a sort of holy grail of many arts. It is a moment when the distinction between “self” and “other” is dissolved. When this happened for the great masters of Asian martial arts, they were unbeatable because they knew what their opponent was going to do as he did it. For men like Uyeshiba, there was no difference between their own attention and their opponent’s intentions.

But this ability comes from the severe requirements of life-and-death fighting. The closer a person gets to his own mortality, the finer his perception of reality becomes until he sees that, at the most basic level, there is no difference between self and other. So if this insight is the ultimate goal of the martial arts and a person tries to reach it without experiencing the conflict and competition that have spawned it, he is doomed to fail.

Once again, I want to say that I’m not trying to minimize or slander aikido and tai chi. Style is not the issue. Any martial art that distances itself from fighting also distances itself from wisdom. What is important is understanding that the martial arts are about fighting and that the wisdom of the martial arts was born from the harsh moral and mental requirements of fighting. Anything else is hollow sentiment.

MARTIAL ARTS EXPERTS GALORE IN THE PHILIPPINES

October 1998

I traveled to the Philippines in June to report on the World Escrima-Kali-Arnis Championships in Cebu, and while I was there I met some of the greatest living exponents of the Philippine martial arts.

The first expert I met was Crispulo “Ising” Atillo. He is one of the last living masters of original *balintawak arnis*. Atillo has two claims to fame. First, he studied arnis under the legendary Venancio “Anciong” Bacon when Bacon was in his prime. Second, he is a survivor of at least four full-contact, no-protection stick-fighting matches.

In fact, Atillo is most famous for his 1983 challenge match with *doce pares* arnis expert Ciracao “Cacoy” Cañete. This was the last legal no-protection challenge match held in the Philippines. It pitted Atillo’s original balintawak against Cañete’s doce pares and *escrido* skills. Although the fight ended in controversy (after less than a minute of action, both men claimed victory), it was definitely the biggest stick-fighting event of recent times.

During my visit, I met a second great balintawak expert, Pacito “Chito” Velez. Velez is the son of another renowned instructor, Teofilo Velez, and the teacher of America’s foremost balintawak authority, Bobby Taboada. His style is unique because, at the advanced levels, you know the outcome of the fight from the first move. Like Taboada, Velez proved this by winning many challenge matches in his youth.

One of the most mysterious styles I came across during my trip was Rodrigo Maranga’s *tres personas escrima*. Until just this year, it was the secret stick-fighting art of the Maranga family, passed down only from father to son for nearly 40 years.

The tres personas style was created by Col. Timoteo Maranga, who was also one of the pillars of balintawak arnis. But Maranga developed his own special version of balintawak based on his research on stick fighting and his deep spiritual beliefs. It is reflected in the name of the style: Tres personas means “three people” and refers to both the experts who influenced Maranga and the Holy Trinity.

Other styles were well-represented in Cebu, but the most famous was probably doce pares, or “12 pairs.” One of the oldest and most respected styles in the Philippines, it is currently headed by the enigmatic Dionisio Cañete.

Cañete comes from a family of skilled practitioners and claims he was born with a stick in his hand. Although he is an expert in his own right (He was an instructor for *jeet kune do* authorities like Dan Inosanto and Ted

Lucaylucay.), his greatest accomplishment has been in bringing arnis to the world. Through his efforts, stick fighting has developed into a competitive sport, complete with rules and protective equipment, and is now practiced in nearly two dozen countries around the world.

One of the advantages of meeting Cañete was that he introduced me to some of the lesser-known experts. In fact, he let me in on one of the best-kept secrets in the Philippine martial arts: Vicente “Inting” Carin.

When it comes to “death matches,” Carin is the real deal. He fought in at least 20 full-contact, no-protection stick-fighting matches and survived a vicious, multiple-opponent knife attack. Carin killed two of his three attackers but was stabbed a number of times in the process. When they found him, Carin had lost so much blood, he was presumed dead. It was only when he woke up in the morgue and asked for a drink of water that they knew he was alive.

In future installments of *Way of the Warrior*, I will profile these martial arts masters. My hope is that more Westerners will get the chance to study stick fighting—in the Philippines, where the standards for the arts are set.

I also hope that the interest of *Black Belt’s* readers will benefit these experts. They are all, without exception, wonderful people with great skills to offer the martial arts world. But they are also getting shortchanged. Today, in the United States and Europe, there are stick-fighting instructors who do a seminar and charge \$1,000 to \$2,000 plus expenses. Meanwhile, the income of most Filipinos is less than \$200 a month.

There’s nothing wrong with American and European instructors making money from teaching the Philippine martial arts. The crime is that most Filipino experts are not teaching. For many of them, one seminar abroad would be equivalent to a year’s wages at home. I hope the columns I write will change this situation. I want to bring some information about the greatest arnis experts alive today to readers around the world—and maybe bring a little bit of the world to the arnis experts, too.

SOURCES OF WISDOM FROM AROUND THE WORLD

November 1998

One of the goals of Way of the Warrior is to change the way people look at the martial arts. This entails examining them in light of ideas from other fields or cultures to show the universal meaning and value of the martial arts. Most of the time, I use these outside ideas without mentioning them or talking about their source. But now I want to discuss some literature that deserves more attention from martial artists.

First, there is a source of ancient Asian wisdom that has been largely overlooked. The great Hindu epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* contain impeccable warrior wisdom, yet most Western martial artists have never even heard of them. In particular, the *Bhagavad Gita*, a short excerpt from the 18-volume *Mahabharata*, speaks directly about the central paradox of fighting.

The *Bhagavad Gita* is a dialogue between a great hero named Arjuna and his chariot driver, who is really the god Krishna. It occurs just before a battle in which Arjuna and his brothers must lead their army against another army led by his cousins, uncles and teachers. Arjuna is left to begin the battle by sounding a conch shell horn. But when he and Krishna drive the chariot out between the two armies, Arjuna looks at the people he must now fight and loses his resolve. He steps out of the chariot, sits on the ground and refuses to wage war.

This is where the book becomes important to martial artists. Krishna sits down beside Arjuna and argues that he must fight. It is his duty to oppose evil, Krishna says. But Arjuna argues that killing is wrong, too. It is a great meditation on a problem that anyone involved with a fighting art will someday face: How can I fight when hurting people is wrong? And the counter will be the same: But how can I stand by and let bad things happen?

Other deep influences on the Way of the Warrior column are Sigmund Freud's works, particularly *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death*. The former is a book that argues that man has inherent destructive urges. Turned inward, these urges become depression and self-loathing. Turned outward, they become aggression. Because depression and self-loathing are painful states of mind, Freud argues that a certain amount of aggression must occur for a person to feel healthy.

This is important to martial artists for two reasons. First, if we accept aggressive feelings as inevitable for the maintenance of mental health,

martial arts training becomes one of the best outlets available. Second, if we accept that aggressive behavior is a primary part of the human condition, safe physical aggression (like contact sports and the martial arts) will always be a natural part of civilized society.

Finally, there are many people in physics and brain science whose ideas appear here in a somewhat sketchy form. They appear as possible answers to the seemingly impossible abilities of legendary martial arts masters.

In particular, I'm interested in the possibility that intense martial arts training can alter perception of time and distance. Some people, like Princeton University's Robert Jahn (*Margins of Reality*), think that conscious intent has a barely measurable effect on the physical world. It's negligible in the macrophysical world but has an effect on the microphysical world. This microphysical world is, according to Karl Pribram (*Brain and Perception*), fundamental to how we think and act.

The thing that is important for our purposes is that time and distance do not mean the same in the physics of the very small as they do in the everyday world. So if the precognitive abilities that ancient masters possessed were in any way real, they will be found by studying the relationship between brain function and quantum physics.

The authors and ideas mentioned above have influenced this column for a reason. They present a real challenge to the complacency of the martial arts. It's all too easy to study only Northeast Asian philosophers and ideas and think we have a special understanding that the rest of the world does not. In reality, there is a world of ideas out there that martial artists need to consider. Otherwise, the world will pass us by and we will become obsolete.

ARNIS GRANDMASTERS, PART 1: CRISPULO ATILLO

December 1998

Few people in the world can truly be called a grandmaster of *arnis*. Fewer still have studied with the original Filipino masters or fought in stick-fighting challenge matches. Crispulo "Ising" Atillo is one of those rare people.

Atillo was 14 years old when he began his formal training in 1952 under *arnis* legend Venancio "Anciong" Bacon, but his first fighting experience came at a much younger age. During the Japanese occupation of the Philippines in the early 1940s, Atillo's father was a member of the resistance,

and more than once both father and son narrowly avoided capture. It was also during these war years that he witnessed Bacon and another legendary *balintawak* master, Teodoro Saavedra, fight in challenge matches. These early experiences left a deep impression on the young Atillo and made him a lifelong devotee of the original style of *balintawak arnis*.

After World War II, the only surviving *balintawak* master was Bacon. It was from him that Atillo learned most of this single-stick style. But Atillo's father was also a student of the late Saavedra, and the senior Atillo passed those skills along to his son. The result was a style of *arnis* that made the junior Atillo one of the best ambassadors of *arnis* in the Philippines.

Atillo's *balintawak arnis* is a single-stick style. The free hand is used for controlling the opponent's stick. When a student begins training, he starts with basic blocks, strikes and stances that are common to most styles of *balintawak*. The stick is held vertically and directly in front of the face while the practitioner swivels from side to side to block attacks. Atillo then teaches stick-to-stick drills, followed by stick-and-hand drills—all of which lead up to his specialty, sparring.

In the Philippines, Atillo is famous as a fighter, and his style reflects this. It emphasizes simple techniques and footwork. In fact, like many boxing coaches, Atillo believes that mastering stances and footwork is the most important part of fighting. They, along with the vertical-stick defense, are given a great deal of attention in his style of *balintawak*.

Atillo claims that his fights are what really make him a master of *arnis*. He has fought in four full-contact challenge matches with no protective gear and has banged sticks with some of the biggest names in the Philippine martial arts. In fact, he fought *doce pares* grandmaster Ciracao "Cacoy" Cañete in the last officially sanctioned "death match" in the Philippines in 1983. While the fight ended in controversy—both sides claimed victory after less than a minute of fighting—it was the kind of encounter that most *arnis* practitioners never even come close to experiencing.

Atillo's future goals include sharing his art with stickfighters in other countries. He has a special fondness for the United States because of childhood memories of his father fighting alongside American soldiers during World War II. Atillo is interested in teaching his style to the world, and he now has students in Europe and the United States.

His goal of spreading his art is an admirable one. In a world that seems bent on making everything contemporary and overly complex, Atillo is one of the last remaining masters of original *balintawak* trying to pass on an uncomplicated but powerful martial art as he enters his twilight years.

ARNIS GRANDMASTERS, PART 2: TIMOTEO AND RODRIGO MARANGA

February 1999

Some great martial arts masters are very secretive about their art. This has come about because of things that have happened in many times and places. Masters of the war arts become worried that their skills will be used for evil ends, so they teach their skills to no one and take their martial secrets to the grave.

Fortunately, some of those great masters manage to find a handful of trustworthy students to pass their art down to, enabling their style to survive after they pass away. This was the case with the late *escrima* expert Col. Timoteo Maranga.

According to his son, Rodrigo Maranga, the late grandmaster of *tres personas escrima de combate super cuentada* was one of the “three pillars” of *balintawak arnis* (the others are Venancio Bacon and Delfin Lopez). Timoteo Maranga had originally started training in *de marina* stick-fighting techniques at age 7 but spent the better part of his youth traveling around the Philippines learning martial arts techniques from many different masters. He even became an expert with the *gudo*, a bladed weapon, before mastering *escrima*.

When Timoteo Maranga met Bacon, he became a devotee of *balintawak arnis*. But after years of study and many challenge matches, he blended the *balintawak* of Bacon with his own experiences and his deep spiritual beliefs to form a new style: *tres personas escrima*.

Tres personas means “three people” and is a reference to the three pillars of *balintawak* and the Holy Trinity. It reflects the late grandmaster’s belief in the Christian God and his thinking that this was a fundamental part of *escrima*. But his beliefs included some things many Western Christians may find curious, like the use of a short recitation, called an *oracion*, to call on supernatural powers, or the stitching of small magical amulets into the skin so the practitioner can absorb their power.

Tres personas is as much about fighting as it is about religion, and this led many people to seek out Maranga for instruction. But the late grandmaster rarely taught anyone outside his family and never accepted money for the lessons. In fact, modern-*arnis* founder Remy Presas was one of the few people outside of the Maranga clan to study *tres personas escrima*. Rodrigo Maranga, the current grandmaster of the style, recalls Presas showing up for lessons with an armful of food for the late grandmaster—because he

wouldn't take money.

The techniques of tres personas escrima are similar to those of balintawak arnis, but they have their own special twist. For instance, tres personas uses the same "candlestick defense" (stick held vertical, body swiveling from side to side to block) as balintawak. But tres personas has 29 methods of attack. It also has a set of complex trapping techniques that differ from those of the balintawak styles.

Because of Col. Timoteo Maranga's secrecy and his commitment to teaching only worthy students, there is but one living master of tres personas escrima: Rodrigo Maranga. In keeping with his father's wishes, Rodrigo Maranga has taught only family members and a few trusted outsiders in the 15 years since his father's death. In mid-1998, he and his son introduced the style to the world for the first time at a conference in Cebu, Philippines.

Rodrigo Maranga hopes that this exposure will help spread his father's style and open the eyes of *escrimadors* everywhere. "This is the first time we're out in the open," he said, "and I hope people will see that [our escrima] truly comes from the heart." It's a legacy that his late father would be proud of.

WHY WRESTLING IS STILL NOT A MARTIAL ART

March 1999

I don't like covering the same topic twice in this column. There are so many interesting things to write about in the martial arts that it hardly seems necessary. But occasionally one of my essays is widely misunderstood and deserves a second look. This is the case with the August 1998 installment, "Why Wrestling Is Not a Martial Art."

I argued that a martial art is defined by effective fighting techniques *and* an explicit set of value judgments. I also argued that the Olympic styles of wrestling are not martial arts because they are pure technique and nothing more. Then and now, the point is that fighting skill alone is never enough. The meaning of a win is as important as winning itself.

Most of the readers who complained about that essay seemed to miss this point entirely. *Black Belt* received a barrage of letters that angrily insisted that wrestling works in a real fight. I never claimed it didn't. In fact, I wrote that with the addition of some boxing and submission skills, "wrestling [may be] the ultimate empty-hand fighting skill." Wrestling's efficacy was never the issue. It's philosophical neutrality was.

A few letter writers seemed to make my point for me by praising the technical virtues they learned in wrestling. They wrote that wrestling teaches “hard work and dedication” or “goal-setting and a belief in one’s self.” But these morally neutral, how-to virtues are not enough. Every goose-stepping fascist in every oppressive society in history worked hard at being a good soldier and was dedicated to his warped agenda. What’s missing from wrestling is a good reason *why* you are working so hard or setting goals.

The one thing that separates a martial art from a cold fighting skill is that it is about something. How one fights is determined as much by the martial artist’s overall worldview as by the demands of combat. Judo, *shotokan* karate, *aikido* and some Japanese sword arts were the martial arts I cited as good examples of this. In principle, judo and shotokan are about building strong, able citizens inside the *dojo* (training hall) and a better world outside the dojo through kindness and mutual cooperation. Likewise, aikido and some of the Japanese sword arts are about time and distance being illusions. It is a worldview that says everything is, at some fundamental level, really only one thing and that the person who does anything to harm you is at an immediate disadvantage. As the old saying goes, “How can a sword cut itself?”

That list could be expanded to include many other Asian arts and even modern hybrids such as *kenpo*, *jeet kune do* and Brazilian *jiu-jitsu*. And you don’t have to agree with their worldview for them to be martial arts. The point would still be the same. The technique of fighting is only half the story.

Some people wrote to say that I was contradicting myself when talking about technique. One writer said that I “cited the use of good technique to justify [Royce] Gracie’s status as a martial artist but used it to deny that to wrestlers” and asked whether it was only small men who beat big men who could rightly be called martial artists. But there are no contradictions here. The techniques of Brazilian jiu-jitsu are different from those of wrestling because they represent substantially different world views. Regardless of the size of the fighters, a victory by one stylist over another represents a victory for that style’s ideals—or lack of them.

One truly disturbing letter came from *shuai chiao* wrestling champion Matt Furey. “Since when do all martial arts have to have a world view?” he demanded. This was disturbing to me because, by all accounts, Furey is a talented fighter who competes at the international level. So he should know better than anybody that a person who can hurt others quickly and

easily must become a thoughtful person with a clear understanding of the place of the fighting arts in the world at large. Anyone who doesn't have this understanding runs the risk of misusing his skills or teaching his students to misuse theirs. Fighting skills may not automatically lead to wisdom, but they do require us to seek it.

Finally, I have a few words for all the readers who said that wrestling is a product of ancient Greece and that I know nothing about that culture. The definition of art ("a selective recreation of reality according to the artist's value judgments") I used in the original column comes from philosopher/novelist Ayn Rand, who was probably this century's most widely read follower of Aristotle. If wrestling is going to become a martial art, it will do so by developing that ancient Greek wisdom into something that speaks to modern fighters in the same way that Rand's novels did to the general public.

ROYCE GRACIE IS ONLY HUMAN

April 1999

It finally happened. Royce Gracie lost. On December 17, 1998 in a sport-*jiu-jitsu* match in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, he fought Wallid Ismail, a Carlson Gracie disciple, and Ismail choked him unconscious. The match lasted less than five minutes.

When I first heard this, I could imagine the grim satisfaction of Gracie's critics. This is something that Gracie's supporters cannot put a positive spin on. Gracie didn't lose because of time limits, a judge's decision or an overwhelming weight advantage. He lost because Ismail was the better fighter that night.

But this is no reason to celebrate. Gracie's descent from the ranks of the no-holds-barred elite is something all martial artists should mourn. It is the end of an era. Gracie brought the dream of the invincible martial arts hero to life, and as he loses that dream dies.

It may seem like I'm overstating Gracie's importance, but I'm not. Now that no-holds-barred fighting and Brazilian *jiu-jitsu* are common facets of the martial arts—some may even say they're *passé*—we tend to forget the enormous impact Gracie had. After his easy victories in the first two Ultimate Fighting Championship events, Gracie really did seem invincible, and it electrified the martial arts. What we only thought was an impossible dream was actually happening. It didn't matter that Gracie was a man and

that we knew he would eventually fail. Just the possibility that he might be unbeatable made him a giant; the rest of us stood in his shadow.

Many martial artists deeply resented this, and that is exactly why we should mourn Gracie's return to human proportions. The high anxiety a truly successful martial artist causes in his peers is what really brings the arts to life. People who loved the traditions and ideals of the martial arts couldn't dismiss Gracie. He was a decent, soft-spoken jiu-jitsu fighter whose family could trace a lineage to Japan, and he was beating people easily without hurting them badly. It was like Gracie was real and the rest of us were just pretending. After decades of relaxing into the belief of being morally superior to all the brawlers and athletes out there, traditional martial artists were being challenged by one of their own.

Likewise, all the bruisers and musclemen out there had a serious challenge to their supremacy. Anyone who thought that maximum strength and a mean streak were enough to win fights had to think again. Here was a skinny jiu-jitsu guy who was not intimidating in any way—and he was whooping everybody. Before this, all the tough guys out there felt superior because our high ideals and ritual exercises couldn't save us from a beating. Then it seemed like only some jiu-jitsu lessons could save us.

In short, once Gracie came on the scene, no one could relax. Everyone was working hard to be like him, fight like him, beat him or discredit him—and that's the way it should be. Success and genius cause anxiety and resentment, and these, in turn, cause more success and greater genius. This is what the dream of the invincible martial arts hero is all about, and this is what died a quiet death when Ismail put Gracie to sleep on that December day.

Gracie is now just one of many jiu-jitsu fighters who lost matches they should have won. Now the anxiety is gone, and everyone can relax into the nihilism that comes all too easy to the martial arts. Traditionalists can return to their moral high ground and muse about the folly of no-holds-barred fighting. They can return to the belief that ideas and traditions endure where people fail.

And all the tough guys and athletes who rule no-holds-barred fighting can feel content with having blunted the sharp sword that was Brazilian jiu-jitsu. They have championed the dark truth that everyone fails, regardless of his or her ideals, and they have won.

Some people may believe that this elegy is premature. Brazilian jiu-jitsu is still a major force in the martial arts, and this is reportedly Gracie's first loss. But anyone who saw Ismail get handled by *pancrase* fighter Yoshiaki

Takahashi in the UFC knows that this loss raises serious questions: If Ismail lost to Takahashi and Gracie lost to Ismail, where does that leave Gracie? What does that say about Gracie jiu-jitsu and Brazilian jiu-jitsu in general?

One thing is certain: Royce Gracie is no longer the messiah of unarmed combat he once was. After a three-year absence from the ring, major health problems and an embarrassing defeat at the hands of another jiu-jitsu fighter, no one still believes he is the best fighter in the world. He may continue to fight—and I genuinely hope he redeems himself by beating Ismail in a rematch—but Gracie has finally become human again, and the martial arts are a little poorer because of it.

ARNIS GRANDMASTERS, PART 3: PACITO “CHITO” VELEZ

May 1999

There is a quiet confidence that comes with experience. It's the kind of confidence that every martial arts instructor promises to inspire in his students. But the truth is, it really belongs only to the best of us, to those who have trained so hard for so long that armed victory is as usual as walking and breathing. It's what I saw hidden in the quiet manner of *teovel balintawak* grandmaster Pacito “Chito” Velez.

Like many Filipino masters, Velez was born into a martial arts family. His father and founder of the *teovel* style, Teofilo Velez, was originally a *doce pares* instructor; stick fighting was a part of everyday life. But when Pacito was 6, the elder Velez met *balintawak* legend Venancio “Anciong” Bacon and converted to his style of *arnis*. It was at this tender age that Pacito began his involvement with *balintawak arnis*.

At first, his father just took him along to watch his practice sessions with Bacon. But before the age of 10, Pacito had begun training, too. Workouts lasted from 6 p.m. until midnight and were conducted without any safety gear. His early dedication to learning the style paid off when he became an instructor while still in his teens. But it was a time not without problems.

Teofilo was very much dedicated to the idea of respecting one's instructors, even after changing styles. But it was the kind of dedication that infuriated his son when one of Teofilo's old instructors began disrespecting him. When his *doce pares* mentor kept inviting the *balintawak* students to learn from him if they wanted to be better than Teofilo, the elder Velez

bore it in good humor. Pacito, however, challenged the *doce pares* man.

When Teofilo found out, he was livid. He forbade his son to fight the match and swore that Pacito would have to fight him first if he wanted to fight one of his instructors. Pacito deferred, saying, "You are my father. I will not fight you." Then he went out and challenged the *doce pares* master anyway. Pacito easily dropped him three times with clubbing blows to the ribs, then knocked him out with a strike to the head after taking him down with a sweep. Afterward, the younger Velez apologized to his father, but it caused much tension in the household.

The techniques of *teovel balintawak arnis* are difficult to sum up in a short essay like this. Limited space allows me to give only a vague outline. That outline is divided into three general groupings: basics, defensive techniques and offensive techniques.

The basics are similar to those of other *balintawak* styles. First, you learn 12 basic strikes and their accompanying blocks. Then you learn to attack and defend randomly. After that, you move on to five basic groupings of techniques, which include lifting and clearing (a specialized kind of trapping in which you scoop the opponent's stick upward and counterstrike), defending against lifting and clearing, thrusts, *abaniko* (fan) strikes, and boxing with the opponent using your free hand. (Note: *Balintawak* is a single-stick style.)

At the next level, you learn methods for hammering and scraping with the butt end of the stick, elbowing with the free hand and stick hand, head-butting, takedowns, and other kicking and sweeping techniques. Up to this point, you have learned the basics of using the strikes, and most of your time was spent defending against them. At the more advanced levels, however, you learn how to take the offensive. Pacito Velez claims that stick fighting becomes like chess: You know how the fight will end from the first move your opponent makes to block your attack.

It is this almost precognitive ability to read an opponent that really separates the masters from the rest of us. They see what we cannot, and in doing so, they frustrate the journeyman fighter. In the brief time I spent with the 46-year-old Velez, I saw this in him. It's a poise that comes not from self-esteem cheerleading but from the simple fact that once he picks up a stick, he is in total control of the situation.

Of all the masters I met in the Philippines, Velez struck me as the one whose art was the most integrated into his being. Most of the time, he was very warm and funny, and we spent as much time talking about music, movies and women as we did about his martial art. But there was some-

thing in his soft-spoken demeanor that betrayed a deep seriousness: Once you cross sticks with him, you never forget what it is.

THE JOKE'S ON US

June 1999

I first heard stories of the humility and secrecy of legendary martial arts masters when I was a boy, and I never understood them. I never understood why, if you were an Asian wizard of sorts, you would not want the world to know. At age 13, it made no sense. But now, having been in the martial arts for more than a decade, I share the desire for anonymity, for there are few things more humbling than being dismissed by your peers.

Like most people in the martial arts, I've spent years learning my art because I love it. I love being near its deep moral paradoxes, and I love being able to win a fight. That's it, plain and simple. But to so many people, the martial arts are at best a joke and at worst sadism dressed up to look like philosophy. It is because of these attitudes that I sometimes wish no one knew I was a martial artist.

No one likes to be considered a joke. To many people, we martial artists are just that. In their eyes, we have an infantile fixation on comic-book ideals and kung fu movies. If a well-meaning friend declares at a party that I am a martial artist, the best response I can hope for is silence. Otherwise, it means enduring jokes about pulling people's hearts from their chests and disappearing in a puff of smoke. It means witnessing the same tired old Bruce Lee pantomimes accompanied by sorry imitations of his high-pitched battle yowl.

Then, if my luck completely runs out, I'll be asked to perform. "Aw, c'mon!" they indignantly demand. "Do some of that karate stuff for us!" It's as though I were a trained seal.

Even more taxing, though, are those who find the martial arts laughable because they believe they are obsolete. They are the condescending morons who believe it is their duty to remind us that guns exist, as though it had never occurred to us. "My answer to all that kung fu crap," they usually say, "is a Smith & Wesson." The strain here comes from suppressing the urge to beat the invariably gunless gun advocate into oblivion as a counterargument. In a civilized setting, it is too easy for someone who knows nothing about violence to abuse you with his ignorance. It seems best in both cases just to keep your martial arts a secret.

This may seem whiny, and perhaps it is. There is nothing so serious that it can't be criticized or made fun of. Unfortunately, being taken seriously as a martial artist has its disadvantages, too. The greatest disadvantage lies in being perceived as someone who delights in cruelty. Some people think martial artists are closer to being killers than clowns.

Once, when the subject of my karate practice came up in conversation, a woman asked me, "Have you ever killed a dog?" After asking her what the hell she meant by that, I discovered that she believed that karate practitioners became progressively better killers by killing progressively bigger animals. Asking whether I had killed a dog was her way of asking how far along in my training I was. "I knew this guy," she whispered gravely, "who learned karate up to the point where you have to kill a person. But he couldn't bring himself to do it, so he quit."

Laughable as this misinformation is, it shows what some laymen think the martial arts are all about. They think we are ritual killers privy to some dark secrets. Given this, what sane person would want people to know he is a martial artist? Being cruel only makes people hate you, fear you or both. Being thought of as cruel by being associated with a tradition of mystical violence has the same effect. Nobody likes a sadist.

So now, after all these years, I enjoy keeping my participation in the martial arts a secret. I gleefully deny knowing anything about them when a layman asks me, and I feel a connection with the ancient masters—in spirit, if not in skill—whenever I do. If someone really wants to know what the martial arts are about, he or she will go to a local *dojo*. That's what those places are for. But if a person wants to minimize our interest in the arts, we shouldn't let him. If we do, the joke is on us.

LOST HORIZONS

July 1999

For better or worse, the idea of progress is what moves the modern world. No matter what field we are in, there is an understanding that things can and should improve. We may never achieve a perfect world, but that is the goal toward which we are always moving.

In the martial arts, there are two kinds of progress. Most of us are moving toward perfect fighting skills or a perfect understanding of being—hopefully both. But after nearly 50 years of study and practice, has the West really made any progress? Are our fighting skills any better than those of our

forebears? Are our insights any deeper than theirs?

I think we have made progress. We have a better understanding of how the human body works and a broader knowledge of the martial arts than most of the old masters did. Whether breadth of knowledge leads to a deep understanding is a question we'll save for later. For now, let's focus on two areas in the martial arts that have really driven



Modern martial artists may be able to develop better fighting skills and acquire more knowledge than their fighting forebears (such as Gichin Funakoshi, right), but those attributes do not necessarily lead to wisdom.

their progress: the rise of full-contact/no-holds-barred competition and the slow but steady accumulation of scholarly work on the martial arts.

The first of these is obvious to most readers. As competitions have evolved over the past 50-odd years, they have shown us the power that is sometimes lost in aesthetics and moral lessons. Bare-knuckle full-contact fighting showed us the force of karate's kicks and punches. *Muay Thai* and Western-rules kickboxing reminded us of the power of elbow strikes, leg kicks and hook punches. Now, in the 1990s, we are being reminded by grapplers that takedowns and finishing holds are the age-old remedy to standing up and slugging it out. In short, these competitions have kept us honest about the basic truths of fighting.

The reason we can call this progress is because of the broad range of competition. The best from every country and style on earth test their skills against one another. Now we can see—maybe for the first time in history—that no one culture or style has a monopoly on good technique.

In addition to this, modern medicine and safety practices have extended the lives of martial arts competitors. The fighters of today are able to survive

injuries that might have killed them in previous centuries. Now, referees stop needless beatings, and doctors repair the broken bodies of winners and losers alike. This means that the fighters of today may know more about fighting because they live long enough to learn from their mistakes.

The other major area of progress is in the field of scholarly research. When the martial arts were introduced into the Western world, they were viewed as occult sciences, more like alchemy than boxing. But as the years passed, people with a passion for the fighting arts wanted a deeper understanding of them. Some studied Asian cultures and languages to better understand the context of the arts. Others took great pains to trace lineages and find legitimate instructors. Some even went to the Orient themselves to study directly with the living legends. When they returned, they brought knowledge of the martial arts' origins that was sorely lacking.

This knowledge can be found in libraries all over the United States and Europe. It may be a little dry for some people's tastes, but it's there and it represents real progress in understanding the origins and cultural context of the martial arts. If an instructor tells us, "This is how they train in Japan," or "We practice the original style practiced at Shaolin Temple," we can check up on him. We can find out what the warriors of long ago were really like instead of just accepting half-truths and nationalist myths. In other words, serious martial arts scholarship keeps us honest about the where's and why's of the martial arts in the same way that competition keeps us honest about their basic physical truths.

The question I've saved until now is whether this broad knowledge of the martial arts has led to deeper insight. Now that we know so much about how to fight well, now that we have seen more and learned more about different martial arts than the old masters did, can we really say we see the underlying truth of combat (and reality in general) better than they did? I think the answer is no. We have more information and maybe even better fighting skills than they did, but these attributes do not automatically lead to wisdom.

With limited knowledge of the world outside their own countries and usually only a handful of techniques, the masters of centuries past had nowhere else to go but inside the arts in which they'd invested so much time. They saw more deeply into the paradox of hurting people for good reasons and into the mystery of perceiving the world around them than our modern world will allow us to do. Maybe we have conquered all the horizons outside ourselves, but maybe we have lost the horizons inside that were once the hallmark of the martial arts.

THE REALITY OF VIOLENCE

August 1999

Anyone who reads *Way of the Warrior* on a regular basis knows that some odd ideas appear here. Over the past year and a half, I've written essays inspired by Hindu epics, psychoanalysis, gender studies, brain science and some unpopular definitions of art. But these ideas are considered odd only in a martial arts context. For the average college student, they are common subjects in general-studies courses.

I rely on these subjects precisely because they are common. They've been strengthened by years of criticism and research and have become a usual part of our intellectual landscape. I spend my time exploring this well-trodden landscape looking at the martial arts from different vantage points and, I hope, offering new insights. But, like anyone, sometimes I get tired of following the easy trails and want to push into new territory. That's what this column is about.

What follows is a pet theory of mine about the relationship between violence, consciousness and the martial arts. It is pure speculation, and I invite readers to consider it or dismiss it as they see fit. But I think it is at least an interesting detour from the common path, and it may even lead somewhere.

This is my theory in a nutshell: In the beginning, we were little more than primates with the potential for consciousness. Like most social primates, we spent much of our time fighting with each other over food or access to females. The first human ancestor with anything like our reflective mind was the first one who felt the sting of regret because of hurting or killing one of his own kind. This caused him to reflect on his actions, giving him an interior life new to our species. Finally, this primordial drama is what we are recreating, to some degree, in every modern *dojo*.

As I said, this is all pure speculation. But it is a line of thought that leads to some interesting conclusions. First, it says that individual consciousness is a learned thing that rose from a sort of unconscious or impersonal twilight awareness. So the warrior Zen ("losing the self" and achieving the "original mind" that makes a warrior invincible) may be an attempt to return to that state of mind, to a time when nature required pure action without the burden of guilt or reflection. But more on this later.

First, there was ancient man with his dim sense of self. Like all other animals, his goal was to survive and procreate, and he did this in much the same way as other animals—with some genetically inherited knowledge

and a lot of trial-and-error learning. The world was outside him, and there was no difference between his emotions and his immediate actions. When he was hungry, he ate. When he was angry, he fought, and when he saw the opposite sex ... well, you get the picture. The only difference between him and other animals was the potential to think about his actions.

My theory is that somewhere in this prehistory, we became the conscious people we are today because of the violence of fighting for a place in a pecking order. One of our early ancestors killed or crippled (which is as bad as killing in the brutal world of nature) another of his own kind and regretted it. Most likely, it was a dominant male killing a mate, a child or a close relative—someone he could see himself in (Freudians would say a “father”).

The lack of anything like restraint in those early days of the human race meant that anger could easily lead to murder. He couldn't imagine the consequences of his actions and did things that are unimaginable to a normal person today. So this first ancestor, probably in a blind rage, accidentally kills a member of his troop who was very close to him. He sees himself in this now lifeless body, and he sees it was his own hands that made it that way.

The act of seeing himself in the victim is, in my opinion, the origin of our conscious mind. The first rule of nature is to survive at all costs. But when you see someone as being identical to you—like a parent, child or sibling—that person's survival is the same as your own. If you end his or her life, you are ending your own. Our first conscious ancestor, then, was the one who was caught between being as violent and selfish as nature intended and making sure that his other selves—the others like him—survived. That first pang of regret was the first time that thought—the mental image of murderous violence—was set against instinctual action.

The part of this theory that is important for martial artists is that we enact a similar drama in training halls around the world. We go there to learn how to fight and develop close friendships. Our fighting skill earns us a place in the group's hierarchy. But anger is frowned on, and we are taught from the beginning that restraint—avoiding a fight unless absolutely necessary—is the highest virtue. The ultimate taboo is hurting or killing just to exorcise one's anger. But anyone who studies the martial arts has his passion get the better of him at one time or another. It is only in the controlled environment of the dojo that we learn the shame of anger without anyone getting killed.

Because my theory is about the basics of psychology, it could be applied

to a lot of phenomena inside and outside the martial arts. I will focus on two that interest me: The first is the shift in awareness that is the ultimate goal of some fighting arts, and the second is the importance of the martial arts in making us civilized human beings.

The shift in awareness, or the warrior Zen mentioned earlier, is a return to an earlier state of mind. Like the theory says, man's first state of mind was pure action without the burden of guilt or reflection. Consciousness was a great advantage for our species in many ways. But when it came to fighting, reflective consciousness was a burden. It amounted to us fighting with ourselves instead of each other.

The professional warriors of the past 2,000 years realized this and used ritual meditations and harsh penance to get rid of their conscious selves. To do the job required of them, they needed to be able to hurt and kill instantly, without guilt and without reflecting on whether it was right or wrong. The unexpected result, though, was that once these hard men dissolved their individual selves, they experienced a sort of universal mind. They felt identical with the sum of all creation—all of the past, present and future—in one shattering moment. Whether this actually made them better fighters is another question, but it certainly *didn't* return them to the animal mind of their ancestors.

Most of us will never experience anything like the earth-shattering visions of oneness that medieval martial artists did. But most of us will at some time get caught in the original drama of consciousness. We will want to beat someone's brains out and know that it is wrong almost at the same instant. But the martial arts are especially important in making sure this is the way things go.

We live in a world that is increasingly in the thrall of consciousness, so much so that we often forget how much of our behavior is motivated by our preconscious "monkey self." We are not born as kind, good-natured citizens. That is something we *learn*. The martial arts are one of the last fields in which we can confront that original monkey self, where we can act out that drama and let that shameful hate and anger come to the surface. It is where we learn to recognize the worst part of ourselves *and* learn how to deal with it.

The danger of not recognizing our own worst self is obvious: If you don't see the deep currents of human thought, they will pull you inexorably toward tragedy. The man who loves to break heads on weekends at the local bar will eventually act out for real the grim scenario of accidental murder that was the origin of consciousness. The boy who is sheltered from conflict

all his life is the one who kills his friend in play with a knife or gun because he doesn't know injury is real. Both tragic players will experience a rush of awareness like our first ancestors did. But it will be too late.

Martial arts schools are—or at least should be—places where we learn about the reality of violence and its consequence. They should be places where we simultaneously learn to fight well and be human because they may be the same thing.

No part of the argument I've made here is stunningly original. Most of it was drawn from standard books on primate behavior, consciousness, the martial arts and psychoanalysis. I can't even say the theory is especially well-reasoned or completely my own. In some respects, it's a shadow of Freud's *Totem and Taboo*. It is, however, an interesting theory and, I hope, something that will fire the blood of some readers.

WHOM DO YOU TRUST?

September 1999

Martial artists have a difficult relationship with the past. On the one hand, most people get into the martial arts because of the deep, unchanging wisdom they believe the arts promise. In theory, that leads to unbeatable fighting skill. On the other hand, those who push the envelope of fighting and reinvent the martial arts to serve their own needs always take center stage. They may not be invincible, but they are here right now and their skills are fresh and powerful. That leaves us with a choice: Do we trust the dead more than the living, or do we not trust the dead at all?

Those who trust the dead are, of course, the traditional martial artists who continue to trust in the judgment of history. They believe that if an art has survived a century or more of change in the world, it has the power to outlast any jeers or attacks leveled at it during our brief lifetime. Those who don't trust the dead at all are those who trust only their own judgment and experience. If a revered fighting art that has been around for centuries doesn't save them from a beating, it has no value.

Into which category do you fall? Personally, I trust the dead a great deal. That is because I trust in the general wisdom of the dead masters. Whenever I read the Hindu epics, translations of samurai manuscripts or even Bruce Lee's writings, I find that they are always ahead of me. That is not just because they came before me; it's because those men took more risks and thought more deeply about the martial arts than most people in any age.

In spite of that, it's hard to trust in the skills that have been handed down to us. I mean, there are powerful techniques in every martial art that have survived into this century, but they often seem woefully out of context. For instance, throwing reverse punches from the hip is really powerful, but carrying your hands that low in a country where most attackers will try to punch you in the jaw is just asking for trouble.

That is why the martial arts have been—and, I guess, always will be—quickenened by those who don't trust the dead. No matter how much we love the unchanging wisdom of the martial arts, it's hard to argue with success in fighting. Those who do usually end up sounding jealous and bitter, arguing that sport-fighting victories are illegitimate because they can't stand any victory besides their own. So like most people in the contemporary martial arts, I look to long-dead masters for guidance. But I really learn how to fight from those who think the philosophies of the old masters should have been buried with them.

It's no big mystery why great fighters dismiss the wisdom of the dead. Their real passion is fighting and winning, and like the rebel angels they are, martial arts competitors are trying to win the highest throne possible. So they focus on superior skill and demand we answer their questions before they even acknowledge any martial arts ideals.

While this staunch realism is admirable, it is only the beginning of martial arts wisdom. Not being able to see meaning in the martial arts is exactly what will keep a fighter's achievements small. I mean, a great fighter may be a titan in his own time, but time will grind his victories into dust within 100 years if he learns nothing about what came before him.

Our present fighting skills eventually will be made as useless as carrying your fist on your hip in a karate match. At that point, it is only the wisdom inherent in a martial art that carries it. Then our current titans will be the dead they now ignore, and no one will trust—or even remember—them.

DON'T THINK, JUST DO

October 1999

It is common knowledge in the martial arts that thought and action oppose each other. The more you think about a technique you are doing, the less likely you are to do it correctly. Because we encounter this every day in the *dojo*, it seems like no big deal—just another obstacle to getting better. But this opposition of thought and action hints at something profound.

Before launching into a discussion about that profound something, it would be worthwhile to clear up exactly what human thought is. Usually, thought means “conscious reflection or reasoning.” We summon up images, sounds or other sensations and consider them. Other times, we compare and contrast what we experience in the world with the memories we summon. The important thing to remember is that thinking means having some kind of analog of reality (image, sound, etc.) in your mind and focusing on it.

Why does thinking about doing something interfere with doing it? Because whatever is in our mind is as real to us as what comes in through our senses. So trying to pay attention to what you see and to your mind’s images is a bit like looking in two directions at the same time—in this case, inward and outward. If you call up the mental picture of what a *kata* should look like while you are doing one, your kata performance will suffer because your attention is divided. If you get in the ring to fight and you imagine what all those people in the audience are thinking of you, it has a paralyzing effect. Both your opponent’s punches and your own imagination are demanding your attention.

Here’s where we start getting to the heart of the matter. If conscious reflection or thought actually hinders our ability to see clearly and be a good fighter, maybe perception and action are basically unconscious. By unconscious, I don’t mean being asleep or comatose. I simply mean that we can be aware of the world around us and do lots of things without really being conscious of it or thinking about it.

That may seem like an odd idea, but it grows on you. Think about the simple act of seeing. How much pause and reflection does recognizing a color or witnessing a movement require? Think of driving a car or playing a piano. Both are complex behaviors that require conscious thought to learn, yet once learned, they become virtually automatic. We can talk, eat and do other things while driving, being oblivious to all the actions that make up driving itself. While playing the piano, we can attend to the notes on the sheet music, all the while being oblivious to the position of our fingers on the keys and the actual movements they make.

Fighting is no different.

Once we’ve done the conscious work of learning the techniques and strategies of the martial arts, they descend into memory. They go to that “place” inside where all knowledge goes when we are not thinking about it. Then we spend years honing our intuition in practice fights, learning to listen to our deep memories and being guided by them. Like the pianist

who sees the notes and lets his hands respond, the skilled martial artist sees what his opponents do and lets his body respond.

It is here, where consciousness is bypassed, that the martial arts become profound. That is because the shift from conscious to unconscious may be a shift in the physics of the brain, going from space-time to the spectral domain. If that is true, our memories (the guides of our martial intuitions) have a certain timeless and spaceless quality to them. In other words, the things we've learned in the martial arts are transformed as they are stored in our brain. So when we are guided by those unconscious memories of how to fight, we may be guided by more than what we've been taught.

THE ARC OF LIFE

November 1999

Toshishiro Obata wrote a great book on *aikijutsu* a few years ago. Although it was a book on aikijutsu techniques, it was also great for another reason: The author presented one of the best discussions and histories of what constitutes true lineage in the martial arts.

In a nutshell, Obata's thesis was that learning from great masters when they are middle-aged is how you get the most and best knowledge from them. That is when they are old enough to totally grasp their art but still young enough to possess high-level skills. I'm sure many *aikido* stylists would take issue with Obata's specific examples; in one of them, he makes much of the softening of *aiki* technique after Morihei Uyeshiba's enlightenment. But that is a very narrow criticism compared to the broad truth of what Obata wrote.

I mention this specifically because the truth of what Obata said is something all martial artists should be aware of. Middle age is when a man really is what we casually call a "master of the martial arts." Physical skills may peak between the age of 18 and 30, but fighting skills alone are not enough to make anyone a master. Understanding fighting as a species of art—knowing not only the "how" but also the "what" and "why" of fighting—is something that comes from a lengthy learning period and a lot of experience. Likewise, intelligence and wisdom may endure into old age, but the senses dim and the body grows frail. It is unfair to expect the same thing from a 70-year-old master that is expected from one who is 40 or 50. In short, a martial artist's career is not a sharp incline in which he goes from having no ability at age 10 to being a master of supernatural powers

at age 80. It is more like an arc, like the sun's path across the sky.

Psychologist Carl Jung once described life as being like the path of the sun through a single day. In childhood and adolescence, a person is like a sun rising "from the nocturnal sea of unconsciousness." The person sees everything in the startling, bright light of a newly born conscious awareness. From adolescence until middle age, the person is like a sun approaching and reaching its apex at noon. The mind illuminates more and more of the world, and the person approaches the climax of understanding and achievement. In the middle of life, the sun descends and the light begins to wane. The person's values reverse, and he concerns himself more with soul-searching than with outward achievements. In the sunset of life, the person's thoughts gradually become as diffuse as those of a child as the person descends into the eternal night from which he was born.

This analogy applies to many of our actions and judgments in the martial arts. We may listen reverently to the grayest and frailest of masters, but we often recognize that their judgement is altered by age. The fire of youth and the lofty achievements of adulthood don't mean as much to someone in his twilight years. We accept the 10-year-old black belts or 20- to 30-year-old "grandmasters" of the world not as prodigies but as people who will one day grow up.

When I think of the great masters of the past, I wonder whether they had the insights of Obata and Jung. I wonder whether they saw the arc of their life as clearly as we do. Did Uyeshiba consciously change his technique while assuming that the wisdom of age would eventually lead other aiki practitioners to him? Did Bruce Lee leave *jeet kune do* open-ended because he suspected he might not live to middle age? Can the current no-holds-barred fighters who rule our world see the sunset in their future? We can only speculate.

One thing is certain: All of us are somewhere in this arc of life right now. For those of us at the dawn of adolescence, the challenge is to see all the bright new world of possibilities before us in the martial arts. We must not shrink from its challenges. For those ascending to the noon of life, it is our job to become the talented fighters and insightful people our masters always promised we'd be and to build on the achievements of youth. And for those in the afternoon of life, it is up to us to not forget our lifetime of achievements. Spirits wane and bodies weaken, but it is our memories that keep the wisdom of the martial arts alive.

DEFINING THE MARTIAL ARTS

December 1999

Defining the martial arts is as difficult as defining any art. That is because the word “art” holds an exalted place in our language. Hanging that tag on anything means it expresses our highest ideals. So when we say, “A martial art is ...” we are making a statement about ultimate truth, and that’s bound to inspire disagreement. But because defining something is the first step to understanding it, we all eventually take a crack at saying what we think the fighting arts are. As in other arts, there are almost as many definitions of the martial arts as there are martial artists. But in our arts, they usually fall into three general categories.

First, some people define a martial art as a fine art. They see it as purely symbolic instead of practical. For them, a martial art is about learning the essential nature of reality by performing the techniques well. Actual fighting is the furthest thing from their mind. In this sense, the martial arts are more closely related to dancing than to kickboxing.

The second definition holds that the martial arts are wholly practical. People who use this definition are concerned almost exclusively with what works in a real fight. Everything from boxing to bayonet fighting is an art because it’s about doing something practical and doing it well. Expressing ideals through fighting is considered either a middle-class luxury or a fool’s game.



PHOTO BY PAM KENS

The first step in understanding anything as complex as the martial arts is defining it.

The third category actually includes the nondefinitions. People who see the martial arts this way believe that defining them is artificial and restricting. They believe that definitions reinforce cultural prejudices and limit their ability to fight or express anything. *Jeet kune do* is probably the best example of using a nondefinition because Bruce Lee admonished his students to “use no way as way.”

If art expresses our highest ideals, what do these definitions imply? What do they say the martial arts are about? That is when things start to get prickly. If you view the martial arts as a type of fine art, you could be expressing virtually anything. A martial art that is purely symbolic can, in theory, express as much as dance does. But the truth is that the martial arts are an end in themselves with no practical purpose but to express Asian ideals. The notion of building better citizens or experiencing a transcendent reality permeates the noncombative arts. The martial arts are noncombative because these martial artists think actual fighting doesn’t express goodness or mystic insight.

People who think of the martial arts as wholly practical are the flip side of the coin. Looking at the martial arts this way implies that all ideals are useless and maybe even false. Saying that a martial art is only about “what works” means that why you fight or what you fight for is not that important—or at least that these are questions that can’t be answered.

Finally, avoiding definitions altogether implies that all knowledge is relative. If you believe that, every martial artist is a universe unto himself. Nothing is really right or wrong, and the only reality is the one we create for ourselves. For my part, I adapted Ayn Rand’s definition of fine arts to the martial arts. She said a fine art is “a selective recreation of reality according to the artist’s value judgments.” If you apply that to the martial arts, it reads, “A martial art is a selective recreation of reality according to the martial artist’s value judgments.” I attempted to devise a definition that would sum up the first two kinds of definitions listed above, but unfortunately it didn’t work.

An art professor with whom I corresponded pointed out the distinction between the fine arts and practical arts. A martial artist can either represent or recreate reality in a *kata* for a wholly aesthetic purpose, or he can actually “do” reality by beating someone in a fight. But he can’t do both at the same time. That seems fair. I can accept a division between the martial arts as practical arts and fine arts. But, like most martial artists, I can’t accept practical martial arts as purely functional. How we fight, the techniques we use and the kinds of damage we can inflict on an opponent are very

stylized. The way a person beats an opponent says a lot about his moral stance and ideals (or his lack of them). In short, I'm looking for a definition of the martial arts that keeps the ideals and the fighting techniques of the martial arts together.

Martial artists who avoid definitions probably think this line of thought is absurd. Why even bother trying to pin down things as dynamic as truth and art and fighting? I can give only this answer: Living in complete freedom from the past and reshaping the martial arts world according to your personal vision is fine if you're one of the masters of our age. But unless you're the second incarnation of Bruce Lee, total freedom is just total chaos. The first step toward understanding anything is to define it.

MARTIAL ARTS WEIRDNESS

January 2000

If you've been in the martial arts for any length of time, you've probably run across a lot of weirdness. Some of it is because the martial arts are cultural artifacts. That is, there is something inherently weird about studying medieval war arts or no-holds-barred fighting methods in a world that has little love for either of them. But some of the weirdness of the martial arts comes from the personalities of the people who are drawn to them. Because hand-to-hand fighting is an extremely intense and individual activity, a fighter's personality quirks and unusual ideas often take on a life of their own.

Boxing fans have long been familiar with the weirdness of boxers. Mike Tyson, for instance, is famous for the bizarre things he says in interviews. My favorite was when Tyson was asked about his future plans. He replied, "I'm gonna fight, fight, fight, fight, fight and destruct the world." On the comical side, Hector "Macho" Camacho was so proud of his body that he would show up for pre-fight weigh-ins stark naked. Equally strange but tragic was the heavyweight championship bout in which Oliver McCall seemed to suffer a nervous breakdown in the ring. After a few rounds, McCall stood in his corner, unhurt but weeping and refusing to continue.

We have our own collection of strange characters in the martial arts, but they usually don't get as much coverage as eccentric boxers. For instance, there is a *muay Thai* kickboxing champ who likes to dress in women's clothes and wear makeup. He enters the ring with a face full of rouge, eye shadow and lipstick, then beats the other guy senseless and gives him a

big kiss on the cheek before raising his arms in victory. In spite of being one of the strangest sports stories of the year, the only major coverage that Thai boxer even got in the United States was a two-minute filler piece on CNN between major news segments.

No-holds barred fighting has also showcased some strange behavior. Some of it was intentionally comical, like when Dan Severn purposely toyed with referee John McCarthy before a big match in the Ultimate Fighting Championship. After the ref went over the rules one last time before the fight, he tersely asked Severn, “Any questions?” Severn replied, “Yeah, if a train leaves Chicago going 60 miles an hour and another train leaves ...” and continued his word problem as the ref turned sharply and walked away. But not all the unusual behavior in the octagon was meant to be funny.

Kimo Leopoldo is a prime example of a fighter with good intentions who seemed to lose something when translated into actions. By all accounts, Leopoldo is a sincere man who really believes he is glorifying God and spreading the gospel through fighting. But NHB combat is definitely not the orthodox way of spreading the “good news” (which is the literal meaning of the word “gospel”). So it strikes most of us as ... well ... weird.

Because every fight is a chance to evangelize, Leopoldo’s pre-fight rituals are also full of his message. But I don’t think it always has the effect on the audience he’d like it to have. For instance, in Leopoldo’s first UFC appearance, he dragged a big wooden cross on his back all the way to the octagon’s gate. But many fight fans likened it to a pro-wrestling stunt and were turned off. Another time Leopoldo decided to take a swipe at secular humanism by belittling the pop-psychology best-seller *I’m OK, You’re OK*. As he marched to the octagon for his superfight with Ken Shamrock, Leopoldo’s trainers carried a huge banner depicting a gruesomely bloody crucified Jesus. It read, “If I’m OK and you’re OK, explain this!” I imagine Leopoldo wanted to impress the gospel message on the audience by shocking them, but it came across as extremely dark humor.

Some martial artists might resent being called weird, but that is more of an observation than a criticism. In fact, being talented and unusual almost guarantees you fame. Think of all the fighters who come and go and are quickly forgotten. But anyone who ever saw Leopoldo approach the ring with a cross on his back or saw a transvestite win a muay Thai championship will never forget it. And that is something those of us living a quiet, ordinary life can only envy.

JAPANESE BASEBALL AND AMERICAN KARATE

February 2000

The Japanese martial arts have been a part of American life for more than 50 years. Ever since the end of World War II, Americans have studied, practiced and promoted arts like judo and karate. In fact, those styles have become so commonplace that most cities have at least one school teaching them. But just because the Japanese martial arts have become popular here doesn't mean they haven't changed in their new setting.

Karate in America is something the old masters of Okinawa and Japan would hardly recognize. A *dojo* (training hall) in the United States is not as much a place of spiritual development as a place of business. We pay money for the knowledge of the *sensei* (instructor) and a good workout. Even the word "karate" itself has changed. It has become a vague, catchall term that could mean any stand-up punch-and-kick art with ties to Asia. So everyone from a *kenpo* master to a kickboxer in a red, white and blue *gi* is said to do karate.

Is anything wrong with that? No. It is all part of the natural transformation any cultural product goes through when it is adopted by an alien culture. In other words, we have changed karate to suit ourselves in the same way the Japanese have changed many American things to suit themselves. A good example of the Japanese side of this equation is baseball.

The Japanese play a game they call *besuboru*, and at first glance, it seems identical to America's national pastime. But Japanese baseball is as strange an animal as American karate. In the same way we have tried to make karate a pure sport or an aerobic exercise, the Japanese have tried to turn baseball into a spiritual discipline.

In Japan, baseball players follow a Spartan code of conduct that most American players think is insane. The Japanese player is expected to love his team the same way he loves his country. He is expected to show total obedience and loyalty to his manager and to never complain. But most of all, he is expected to push himself during practice to the point of collapse.

The man who came up with those rules was Suishi Tobita, a baseball coach who insisted on comparing baseball to *bushido*. Sportswriter Robert Whiting once quoted Tobita as saying, "Student baseball must be the baseball of self-discipline, or trying to attain the truth, just as in Zen Buddhism. It must be much more than just a hobby. In many cases, it must be a baseball of pain ... and savage treatment." Because Tobita coached his team to a perfect season (36-0), his ideas now guide most Japanese players

and coaches, both professional and amateur.

This attitude toward baseball may sound crazy to many American fans and players, but I'm sure it sounds very familiar to *Black Belt's* readers. Anyone who has practiced karate under a traditional Japanese instructor has heard the mantras of loyalty, obedience and self-discipline a thousand times. What's more, he has probably experienced the pain of being mercilessly pushed past his limits. In the past, karate instructors were as convinced as modern Japanese baseball coaches that this was good for students and that it would develop their spirit and give them special insight. But all it really did was convince many Americans that karate needed to be changed.

The American attitude toward karate is similar to our attitude about sports in general. Most of us think of baseball, basketball, football and boxing as something fun to do or watch. Some people are lucky enough to play or coach sports for a living. They think of it as an occupation or a business but not as a spiritual discipline. They don't field ground balls until they drop in order to become a morally correct athlete, and we don't spar until we pass out in order to become a good *karateka* (karate practitioner). What we have done is strip karate down to the basic mechanics of technique and competition because the Japanese ideals don't suit us.

Still, there is a vocal minority in the American martial arts community that loves the Japanese ideals. They bemoan the state of karate in America and wish it could be reformed. I can't say I don't sympathize with them, but trying to get American practitioners to give up musical *kata*, star-spangled gi and karate aerobics is as useless as trying to get Japanese baseball coaches to stop putting their teams through four-hour practices before each game. American karate is like Japanese baseball: It's not better or worse than it was in its homeland, but it sure is different.

THE SEARCH FOR INNER PEACE

March 2000

Much ado is made about the spiritual benefits of martial arts practice. In their highest and purest form, the martial arts are supposed to bring us inner peace and understanding. But the great spiritual change promised at the highest levels of training seems more like wishful thinking than reality.

More often than not, high-ranked masters are a disappointment. It's not that they're bad people. They're just ordinary, uninspiring men who happen

to be blessed with a great deal of martial arts knowledge. Once they take off their *gi* and *hakama* (traditional Japanese trousers) and change into street clothes, they are transformed into amiable, middle-aged men—more like friends of your dad than martial saints.

So if the real martial artists of the highest rank are all too ordinary, where do we look for the great spiritual changes we were promised? Where does the wish for inner peace and insight come from? Furthermore, do the martial arts ever grant these wishes? Does anything we do ever touch the infinite—even for a moment?

Saying where wishes come from is often as easy as pointing to our silences. A deep desire for peace and understanding often betrays a lack of both, and that is exactly what we don't talk about in the martial arts. We gloss over the turmoil and personal darkness that “necessarily” accompany the fighting arts and pretend they don't matter, but it is closer to the truth to say they are the secret soul of the martial arts.

The burning desire to win, to master everyone you fight, is the beginning of all martial arts. But anyone who has ever been consumed with passion (madly in love, fiercely religious, etc.) knows that it's not always ecstasy. The great highs of winning a championship fight are accompanied by deep anxieties about losing. Before modern times and the advent of humane sport-fighting rules, an intense fear of one's own violent death haunted every warrior. Is it any wonder that the old masters of war—who were as tortured as they were skilled—sought inner peace above all things?

Once again, where should we look for the great spiritual changes promised by the martial arts? We ought to start by looking to the greatest fighters. They are the ones ridden by the devil, the ones who want to win so badly it consumes their life. They are also the ones who need peace of mind more than anyone.

Granted, most great fighters never achieve real inner peace; any brief history of boxing will demonstrate that. But being a great fighter is almost a prerequisite for attaining the deep wisdom of the martial arts. It's as though the great spiritual gifts of the arts were on the other side of a painful physical and emotional struggle you can avoid or surrender to but not leap over. In other words, you can be a great fighter without being very spiritual, but you can't become one of the master spirits of our age without first becoming a great fighter.

Again, does anything we do touch the infinite? That's a tough question and one to which I won't pretend to have an answer. However, the martial arts are the only place where mortal danger, coupled with great physical

skill and deep moral conflict, may have forced men in previous times to glimpse the infinite. The archer could see himself, the target and the arrow as one undivided whole. The swordsman could feel identical with his opponent, even as he was cutting him down, and so believed that life and death, much like time and distance, were illusions.

These glimpses changed the old masters, giving them the peace they prized so highly. So it will be interesting to see whether the fighters of today can achieve the same inner peace and deep insight. They are the only ones who currently live with mortal danger similar to what the old masters lived with, and they must face the same personal demons. It's as though the whole martial arts world were watching and silently wondering, "Will they succeed?"

NOW YOU SEE IT, NOW YOU DON'T

April 2000

How we see the world is as important as the techniques we learn in the martial arts, but seeing the world is not meant only in an abstract sense here. I'm not talking about only attitude or point of view. Sight itself is as important and as misunderstood as the martial philosophies that guide it.

In ancient times, people thought sight was something that came out of the eyes. They thought it fell on things like a spotlight. Now, of course, we know that the eyes don't project anything. They receive light. Light reflects off things and passes through the lenses of the eyes. There, it is transformed into an upside-down image on the retina.

It all seems very simple and cameralike. Our eyes take pictures of the world, our brains interpret those pictures and our conscious selves decide what to do about them. For example, you watch a sparring partner drop his hands when you kick his body, so you decide to fake a kick and punch his head instead. A more subtle example is the archer taking a mental snapshot of his target, then angling his bow to fit what he sees before releasing his arrow. It all seems very simple, but it's not.

One of the big mysteries of psychology is how we get a three-dimensional experience from a two-dimensional, concave, upside-down image on the back of our eyes. Indeed, some people wonder how we can experience a world out there at all. Why don't we feel light hitting the retinas or sound hitting the eardrums as an immediate experience, like we feel skin on skin



PHOTO BY ROBERT W. YOUNG

Ninjutsu is an example of a martial art that is based on the premise that human beings create their own reality.

when we get kissed or slapped? Where does our sense of distance and depth come from? In other words, how does the archer know where the target is located? How do we see our sparring partners at all?

These are tough questions, and detailed answers are beyond the scope of this column. But a few ideas from perception research can be discussed. They include how light acts, what our eyes do with light and what our brains do with information from our eyes. That may seem a bit out of the way for a martial arts column, but bear with me for a moment.

First, what hits our eyes is really a massive blur of light interfering with itself. The lenses of our eyes transform it into an image. Second, this image isn't static like the one a camera captures; it is a flow of visual information. We constantly move our heads and bodies to see things. Therefore, the images on our retinas are also constantly moving and changing. Even when we try to remain perfectly still, our eyes involuntarily twitch to prevent receptor fatigue. Finally, our brains construct a best-guess picture of the world from invariants in this optical flow of information and from past experience. In other words, what we see is not an exact copy of reality as it is. Rather, we create what we see every waking minute of our lives.

Of course, this is nothing new to martial artists. Whole arts have been built around the understanding that we make up our own reality. *Ninjutsu* is the prime example. What is really there? A man in black waiting to cut down his enemy. What do we see? A bend in the shadows, if anything at all. It doesn't matter a bit that you know it's a perceptual trick. Until the ninja reveals himself, shadows "are" the reality.

The real surprise, however, is not that ninjutsu experts can fool our senses. Any adept magician can do that. The real surprise is that all perceptions, even the most common ones, have an illusory quality. For example, consider the room you are sitting in right now. Without lifting your eyes from this page to look at it, you probably have a good idea of the size and shape of the room. You can sense where its contours and corners are. In fact, you probably have a good idea of the features that are behind you. It's not because you can see out of the back of your head, and it's not because you're psychic. It's because you are creating a personal, relatively accurate, 3-D experience from the light and sounds you perceive. It's as though you were walking around in a personal hologram that's as accurate as you allow it to be.

What does that mean to martial artists? It means that during every moment of training, sport fighting or defending ourselves, we are struggling to see what is really there. Even the hard-nosed, reality-fighting tough guys

have a hard time seeing what's really going on in the ring when they're going at it. It's one thing to guess the contours of the room you're sitting in while reading this essay; it's another thing entirely to guess where the ropes are when some bruiser is trying to pound you. In life-and-death self-defense, it's even harder to see things clearly.

What this ultimately means to anyone interested in fighting is that the meditative traditions of the martial arts are their greatest treasure. The ancients may have been wrong about the mechanics of how our eyes work, but they were right to say that what we see really comes from us. The Zen discipline of attention, of sensing what is really there, is as important—maybe even more important—than the fighting techniques we learn. Without this kind of attention, we live in fear that the best-guess worlds our brains create for us may be wrong and that we may pay for this mistake with our lives someday. But those who train hard to see the world as it really is may win something more than a sharp eye. When the world their minds create is identical to what is real, they may see more than we can imagine.

FIGHTING LIKE ANIMALS, PART 1

May 2000

For centuries, men have fought like animals. That is, they've patterned their martial arts after the movements of animals. The obvious examples are the kung fu styles that mimic the movements of snakes, tigers, eagles, monkeys and a host of other wild things—some real, some imaginary. But the list doesn't end there. Many arts, including karate and *pentjak silat*, have animal forms. Even Brazilian *jiu-jitsu* has a set of exercises based on the natural movements of critters.

Does this mean we're really fighting like the animals we say we are? It's unlikely. Serious observation and analysis of animal behavior in the wild didn't begin in earnest until the mid-1900s. Before that time, comparative psychology was long on theory and behavior experiments and short on fieldwork. So it's more likely that we actually fight the way we imagine animals would.

So how do animals fight? Many snakes poison other animals or squeeze them until they suffocate. Tigers attack from behind, clamp onto a victim with huge claws and bite its neck. Monkeys are a special case because they are more closely related to us than other animals are. We'll return to them

shortly. Most animal styles resemble only the movements of animals. I don't know of any kung fu school where poisoning and neck biting are taught.

Some readers will point out that animal forms are *based* on the movements of animals, not exact copies of them. That may be, but because no one knew much about animal behavior until about 50 years ago, the old masters didn't have much to base an art on. Any beauty or power in those animal forms owe more to the masters' ingenuity than their understanding of animals. They built something enduring out of almost nothing.

But why did they even bother? Why did the old masters try so hard to imitate the movements of animals? Moreover, why do we continue to do so today? It's because we see animals as pure and natural, while we see ourselves as alien and corrupt. Imitating animals is an attempt to reconnect with an imagined past of purity and effortless power.

One of the persistent myths of mankind is that of the lost paradise. Many people believe that everything was good and pure and true in the remote past. Then some weak or evil ancestors did something to corrupt our species, ruin our perfect state and ensure a steady moral decline. It's a myth that takes on many forms.

Christians believe that our first ancestors lived lives of innocent bliss in a perfect garden. Then they disobeyed God by eating a forbidden fruit that gave them knowledge of good and evil. So they were expelled from paradise and condemned to a mortal existence. Likewise, Marxists and feminists believe that prehistoric hunter-gatherers lived in a state of perfect equality and freedom. Then ambitious men ruined it by forcing women into exclusive marriages so they could control the inheritance of their property. In the martial arts, however, the lost paradise is not quite so concrete.

Many martial artists believe in a past in which holy warriors had a near magical innocence. They believe that Indian priests or Shaolin monks were so in tune with nature that they had the wisdom and power of minor deities. Then, as one version of the legend has it, bad students used those martial skills for selfish or evil ends. Consequently, they lost their connection with nature and its hidden gifts, and left succeeding generations groping for a true martial art.

If you believe that story, imitating animals makes perfect sense. They have never fallen from grace like we have, so they must retain some of the magical innocence we've lost. You might even believe we can learn about our true selves from animals.

I agree. We do learn about our true selves from animals. But we don't learn about lost paradises or once-perfect states from them. We learn that

we are no less pure or natural than other animals. In particular, we learn from our monkey and ape cousins that how we fight is a lot more natural and animallike than we ever suspected. In fact, it may be more animallike than we are comfortable with.

FIGHTING LIKE ANIMALS, PART 2

June 2000

In the May 2000 installment of *Way of the Warrior*, I wrote about why martial artists imitate animals. The point of that essay was to observe that we copy animals to try to reconnect with some lost state of perfect understanding and effortless power. That is, many martial artists look to nature for their real self, and they assume it will be gentler and wiser than their civilized self.

This simply isn't the case.

Nature is cruel and indifferent. It is driven by the blind hunger to sustain and recreate itself, and in the service of this hunger, it often rewards violence. Animals fight to defend territory and ascend group hierarchies. The best fighters get the best nature has to offer. Meanwhile, weaker animals eat less, often go childless and are most likely to be food for predators. When martial artists look to nature for their real self, that is where they must begin.

Many martial artists use examples of animal behavior to support their arguments about what a real martial art is. One of the *Gracie in Action* videos is infamous for its stock footage of a lion tackling a herd animal and immediately going for its neck. The implication is that Brazilian *jiu-jitsu* is more real than other arts because it resembles a wild animal's hunting technique. Likewise, a famous catch-as-catch-can wrestler pointed out that a chimpanzee could easily beat a man despite being smaller. But it wouldn't wrap his legs around a man; it would be constantly moving and attacking from different positions. The implication is that wrestling is more like an ape's natural fighting skills and thus more legitimate than *jiu-jitsu*.

What these examples have right is the assumption that human violence is like animal violence. But there is a danger in making specific comparisons between different species' behavior. Just because there are some similarities between lion, chimp and human fights doesn't necessarily mean there is a hidden connection. For example, lions may tackle their prey and go for its neck, but this is a hunting behavior. It is how an animal from one species

attacks a weaker animal from another species. It is not like a man fighting another man. When lions fight other lions, it involves a group encircling and slowly picking apart an unlucky loner from another pride or a new alpha male killing his vanquished rival's cubs.

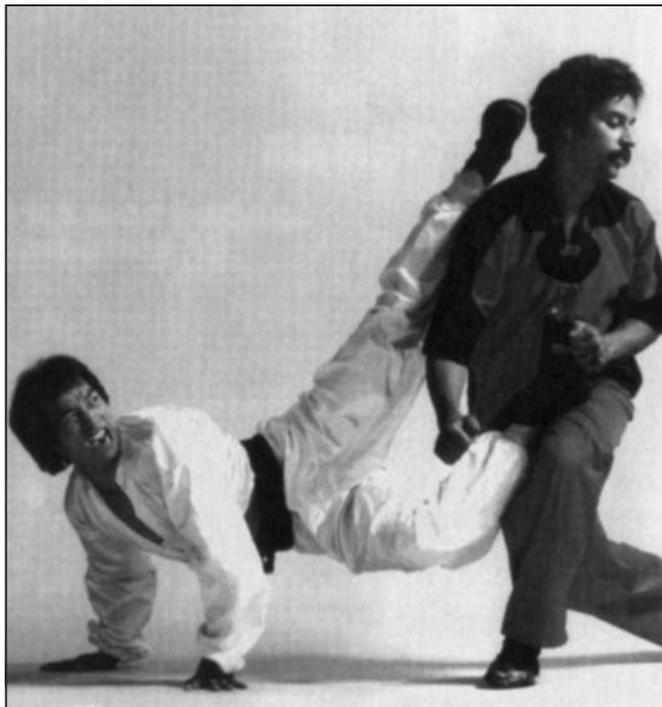
Still, as far as comparisons between people and animals go, this is a weak one. Lions and humans are very

different species responding to different evolutionary pressures. If a martial artist wants to find his secret self in the animal kingdom, he must look to the animals most like himself—the great apes.

The great apes—gorillas, orangutans, chimpanzees, etc.—can tell us about ourselves because they are our closest relatives. Gene studies have shown that monkeys, baboons and other primates are more like distant cousins. So when we see something familiar in ape violence—something that is unusual in other primates—it is not a coincidence; it is a shared legacy.

So how do apes fight? They've been observed biting, slapping, kicking, twisting limbs and even punching. In fact, researcher Richard Wrangham once observed a chimp punching a baboon in the stomach to win a fight over a fruit tree. Another researcher even filmed chimps beating a leopard with sticks.

The point here is that apes use such a variety of fighting techniques that any martial artist can find analogs to his art in ape behavior. But anyone who



Practitioners of kung fu often base their movements on the behavior of animals in the wild, but the true lesson nature offers martial artists is that our civilized self is gentler and wiser than our natural self. (For illustrative purposes, kung fu expert Eric Lee is shown kicking an opponent.)

concentrates too much on examples that support his point of view misses the big picture. For example, chimps don't use the guard when fighting and, yes, the average chimp can easily destroy the average man. But this has more to do with the fact that the average chimp is many times stronger than a man in spite of being smaller. If we want to understand human violence, we must look for parallels in how chimps fight other chimps.

When you look at the overall pattern of chimpanzee violence, it is disturbingly familiar. In *Demonic Males: Apes and the Origin of Human Violence*, Wrangham and Dale Peterson outline how chimpanzee communities are shaped by fierce competition between rival groups. Within these groups, males establish a pecking order based on fighting prowess and alliances with other strong males. Then males from these groups form patrols and regularly go deep into each other's territory, where they kill any member of the opposing group they find alone. That behavior may have evolved because it's a low-risk way to eliminate rivals for precious resources. The thesis of the book is that this is our legacy.

What is disturbing is that we see a similar type of behavior in the martial arts. The majority of martial artists are men. We form groups to practice fighting skills. We develop pecking orders in the *dojo* and form strong friendships and rivalries. Eventually, we seek out other groups of men to compete with. Only our civilized self keeps these competitions relatively peaceful. Nature would have it otherwise.

If we learn anything from nature, it is this: The civilized self is our gentler and wiser self. The hidden or natural self is what gang wars and organized crime are all about—men fighting and killing other men for wealth and status. The martial arts are one of those rare examples where things can be different. A balance can be struck between our animal self and civilized self. We can indulge and accept our darker self without it leading to murder. But most of all, we can become strong enough to resist the blind cruelty of others. We may be animals, but we don't have to fight like them.

WHY DO WE CONTINUE?

July 2000

I gave up the martial arts recently. It was after a long workout that left me beat up and wondering why I even bother. As I sat nursing an aching back and a bum knee, I searched for a good reason to keep hitting the mats. I couldn't think of a single one. I don't have a dire need to defend myself,

I'm never going to make a living as a professional fighter and I can stay in shape doing other things. So I quit the martial arts.

Every time I say this I mean it, and for a short while, the martial arts are unimportant to me. But then my mind drifts back to them while I'm reading or pedaling my exercise bike. Thoughts emerge almost involuntarily, and I find myself writing a column and itching to practice again. It's never more than a few days before I want to do something martial.

So now, as I sit here writing, I'm looking for the reasons why I can't let go of the martial arts. I imagine I'm not the only one who does this, either. There are many people out there who devote their life to the arts and are still not sure whether it is wise or neurotic. In fact, legendary karate expert Chojun Miyagi once lamented about all the things he could have done with his life had he focused his energy on something besides karate. But like many of us, he could not escape the martial arts.

What makes us carry on year after year? The first thing that comes to mind is that we just enjoy fighting the same way that some people enjoy baseball or badminton. We keep practicing just because of the sheer athletic pleasure of it. But most athletics are just athletics, not whole lifestyles. The moral lessons of badminton (if there are any) don't spill over into other parts of our life.

The deep moral paradox of fighting is one of the enduring attractions of the martial arts. Because violence is part of life, it is something we must understand and deal with. Every human being learns at an early age that hurting people is wrong. And yet fighting is one of the most exciting things in life, so much so that many men fight for no good reason. So we reason that the only time we should fight is to prevent this kind of senseless violence. The reasoning may be sound, but it is psychologically unsatisfying. Even if we're hurting people for the right reasons, we are still hurting them. How can we do what we must (fight for what is right) when it is the opposite of what is right (not hurting people)?

This is one of the truly compelling parts of the martial arts because it is an enduring ethical question. The conflict between humanity and duty is as old as civilization and finds its best expression in the literature of one of the oldest civilizations: India.

A short philosophical text called *Bhagavad Gita*, which is an excerpt from the enormous Hindu epic *Mahabharata*, tells the story of a hero named Arjuna who converses with a god named Krishna. Arjuna is trying to find the will to fight a war against people he loves even though he knows what they are doing is wrong. Krishna gently reasons with him at first, then

argues more forcefully as Arjuna remains unable to act in the face of evil. As the book builds to its climax, Krishna offers Arjuna glimpses of divinity. He shows him how the natural world hints at an unbroken wholeness that is maintained through a kind of mental discipline—the kind that Arjuna does not have. Finally, with all his options spent, Krishna lets Arjuna see the whole of creation through a god’s eyes and it is devastating. It is only then, after he has been humbled by a vision larger than life itself, that he picks up his bow and quiver and heads off to fight.

That is what keeps us in the martial arts. From the simple beginning of enjoying fighting and trying to resolve a seemingly simple moral paradox, we are led to deeper things. Even people who don’t care about philosophy or religion feel that there is something profound in the martial arts. They may not have words for it, but they feel the humbling visions of *Bhagavad Gita* implicit in the smallest act of fighting. It is only in the martial arts that we can test the limits of our mortality and our understanding.

As I said before, I’m not sure whether it’s wise or neurotic to search for these experiences. I know only that I enjoy fighting and that in it I have found a tangle of interests and problems that I find compelling. As long as I’m alive, I’ll probably keep giving them up and returning to them—just as I suspect many of you will do, too.

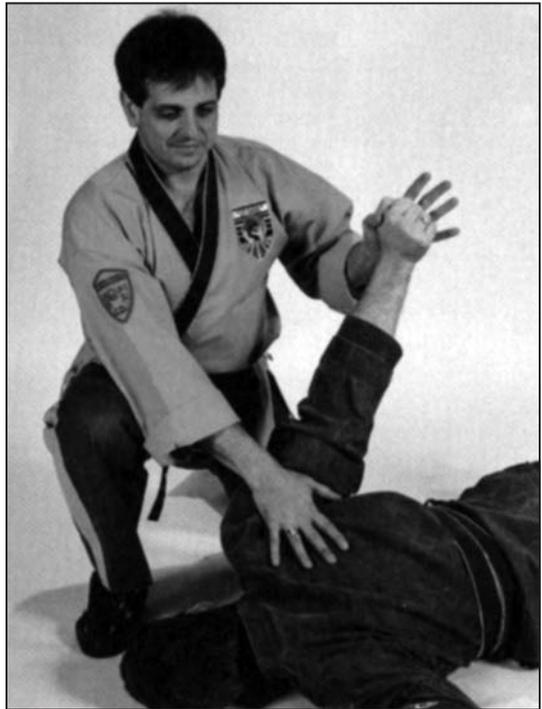


PHOTO BY ROBERT W. YOUNG

One of the reasons martial artists continue to train is because they love learning how to fight. (For illustrative purposes, Steve DeMasco is shown performing a shoulder lock.)

METAPHYSICS AND THE MARTIAL ARTS

August 2000

I love hearing from readers, especially when they think I'm wrong.

In the February 2000 issue, Chris Colderley wrote a letter to say I was wrong to use Ayn Rand's ideas in my columns about wrestling because she illustrates her philosophy in her novels by portraying an elite person fighting against collectivism. A true artist is not confined by the dictates of any system, he argued.

In a way, Colderley is right. Rand would have valued wrestlers above traditional Asian martial artists—if she valued fighters at all. That is mostly because she found Asian mysticism repellent. Also, she wouldn't have approved of me adapting her definition of fine arts to the martial arts. In her scheme, there are arts (skill at doing something real) and fine arts (recreating reality through sculpture, literature, painting, etc.) For Rand, fighting was about “doing” reality, not recreating it.

But Rand would have agreed with me about one thing: An artist expresses his values through his art. He shows us his overall worldview.

I don't want to go into definitions of art here, but I do want to discuss the subject of metaphysics a little.

According to Rand, a metaphysic is an integrated world view. We start life with only basic sense perceptions. Then, based on our sensory experience, we form concepts of what things are. Finally, we integrate those concepts to form a metaphysic, an overall understanding of existence and our place in it.

From a martial artist's point of view, Rand's metaphysics work like this: As a child, you learn what bodies, hands, fists and so on are. Then, as you get older, you experience punches or kicks and develop a concept of fighting. As you move into adulthood, you develop concepts like sport and art, and you try to understand how those concepts fit together. Finally, you try to integrate your concepts of fighting, art and sport with the rest of your knowledge to form a worldview, a metaphysic.

I may be using the martial artist's mind in this example, but it is also the blueprint for everyone's conscious self. And in Rand's blueprint, identity (saying what the facts are) and noncontradiction (making sure your facts agree with each other) are primary.

I'm stressing this because some *Black Belt* readers familiar with Rand's work wrote to say she championed the fiercely independent and creative

individual. But that doesn't mean she thought anything goes. She thought no one was bound by the conventions of culture and religion, but she was adamant about the laws of identity and noncontradiction being universal. In other words, she would have seen anyone striving for a unified understanding of all aspects of fighting as a true martial artist, but she would have regarded people who ignored facts or happily contradicted themselves as evil. For Rand, the sin of ignorance was a sin against life.

I offer the following to readers who were offended by my columns about wrestling. Having a metaphysic, a clear understanding of the facts and how they go together, is essential to being human. Fighting well and understanding fighting skills and their place in existence is essential to being a martial artist. Olympic wrestling fosters great fighting skill, but any philosophy taught in wrestling is nowhere near as broad or complex as that of many traditional and some modern martial arts. Also, too many thoughtful and intelligent martial artists who are supposed to be fighting experts can't keep an average high-school wrestler from grounding and pounding them.

I leave it to the readers to resolve these contradictions for themselves. For my part, I've hoped all along that wrestlers would step up to the challenge and develop a metaphysic that would challenge or even supplant that of the traditional Asian martial arts. I really do like wrestling. It is vital and powerful, and it forces martial artists out of complacency. Yet there is something lacking in it, something that only thoughtful and intelligent wrestlers can change.

THE BUDO MIND LIVES ON IN JAPAN

September 2000

There is something about distance that tickles the imagination. *Taekwondo* people talk about how amazing the fighters are in Korea, and kung fu students talk about obscure masters hidden in the remote mountains of China. In fact, there are always stories circulating among martial artists about how great the training or competition is in some faraway place. It's the kind of thing that tempts people to hit the road so they can see it for themselves.

One of the things I came to Japan to see for myself was full-contact and no-holds-barred fighting. That's because Japan has just about every variation of sport fighting you can imagine. There are pure stand-up competi-

tions, like the full-contact bare-knuckle karate tournaments that are held in the West; kickboxing extravaganzas, like K-1; pure grappling competitions; sumo and judo tournaments; a growing Brazilian *jiu-jitsu* circuit; and even some *sambo* and amateur wrestling. But it's the variety of hybrid grappling and striking competitions that really attracts attention.

For example, there are competitions that feature *vale tudo/shooto* rules. In these events, fighters can punch and kick while they're standing or on the ground, and they can submit their opponent with locks and chokes. Then there is *pancrase*, which is similar to vale tudo except that the fighters can't punch to the head. They can, however, throw kicks, knees and open-hand strikes to the head. Next, we have shootboxing, which is like kickboxing except that it also has throws. Finally, there is a new sport called SA boxing, which is like kickboxing except the fighters keep going at it after they go to the mat. While they are on the ground, it's all punching and kicking; submission techniques are prohibited.

The first full-contact tournament I saw in Japan was an amateur shooto event in Sapporo. In it, the fighters—who wear open-fingered gloves and boxing headgear—can throw punches, knees and elbows while standing. On the ground, they can use only submission techniques. At the end of a match, they add up all the striking and ground-fighting points to determine the winner.

That event, the Sapporo Free-Fight III, featured 11 single matches with fighters from all over Hokkaido. The judges were some of the biggest names in shooto: Yuki Sasaki, the No. 2 ranked light-heavyweight in Japan; Kojiro Ube, a former featherweight champ; and Yuki Nakai, the guy who took a wicked beating in the Japan Vale Tudo I. (He got hurt pretty bad but still managed to submit two larger opponents. He lost to Rickson Gracie in the finals, but he definitely showed the world how tough Japanese fighters can be.)

The matches were also good. My favorite featured Eiji Ogasawara, who was in the middle of a two-fight losing streak. In this match, he looked like a different fighter. He dominated his opponent, putting him away in the first round with a rear-naked choke. That's what amateur fighting is all about: You learn from your mistakes, correct them and win.

As I left the event, I thought of all the stories I'd heard about competition in Japan when I was a kid in the United States. I remember being fascinated and skeptical of those tall tales. For example, there were stories of *karateka* with iron fists and men who were so devoted to fighting that they would rather die than lose. Now that I'm here, I have to say that Japan lives up to its reputation as one of the most martial places on earth. While fighters may not battle to the death anymore, there is still plenty of

spirit here in the hearts of the martial artists who participate in all types of competitions.

JAPANESE ARCHERY REVISITED

October 2000

The first time the outside world became aware of *kyudo* (Japanese archery) was when Eugen Herrigel wrote a wonderful book about it called *Zen in the Art of Archery*. It was the first book on any martial art that really captured the public's imagination, and because of it, many people turned to the arts looking for the same kind of deep, mystical experiences Herrigel had. The difference was that most of those later searchers didn't take up *kyudo*. They looked for deep truths in hand-to-hand arts like karate or *aikido* and left archery to those who had the patience for it.

Actually, lack of patience isn't the only reason *kyudo* remains rare outside Japan. A lot of Westerners won't spend lots of money on exotic, imported weapons that will be used only in purely ceremonial martial arts practice. But spending time as well as money on that kind of art is a problem, too. Why should a person devote years to learning how to send arrows through targets when he could achieve mystical insight through a more practical art? If you get the same insight from both karate and *kyudo*, wouldn't you choose the one that would save you from a beating? Most people do.

So *kyudo* remains a niche sport, something interesting that people do in Japan, something that has only academic relevance to us. Even if archery were about practical self-defense, if suddenly guns and our knowledge of them vanished, there would still be something unsettling about it. Shooting arrows into people from a safe distance offends our martial arts sensibilities. The closest analogy in modern times is that of a sniper coldly picking off his targets from a hiding place. It has none of the fairness we imagine hand-to-hand combat as having. There is no thrust and parry, no duck and weave, no direct matching of skill against skill. There is only the unwitting victim and the cold, predatory skill of the archer. All the sportsmanship and fair play we learn in point fighting and judo tournaments seem absent.

In spite of that, *kyudo* remains very much a martial art. The bow and arrow were Paleolithic man's high technology, much more immediately useful to a hunter than a sword or halberd. With them, he could kill his food or his enemy at a distance without risking his own life. Furthermore, archery has always figured strongly in Asia's religious traditions. In India,

the great epics are centered on heroic archers, like Rama in the *Ramayana*, or Arjuna in *Mahabharata* and its excerpt, *Bhagavad Gita*. There is even a legend that the Buddha was an archer before his enlightenment. So in archery, there exist both the practical skill and the metaphysics we normally associate with the martial arts—even though they are different from what we're used to in hand-to-hand fighting.

Still, kyudo is so different from our daily experience that it's hard to relate to. But it takes only a little imagination to understand why mystics and warriors alike found the bow and arrow powerful symbols. In archery—and especially kyudo—the central message of mysticism is brought into sharp relief. There is the archer aiming his sights down a stark, unornamented range. There is the long arrow nocked in the bowstring and the hands carefully angling it toward a distant target. There is time and distance, with the subject taking a certain amount of time and effort to send his arrow into that object. But in the seemingly simple mechanics of eyesight and body movement, we find a blurring of consciousness. Master archers tell us that the more we are aware of the pieces of archery, the more it will go wrong. And the mystics tell us that this is because, at the most basic level, there really are no pieces. Distance and our notion of subject and object are illusions, and only surrendering to a vision of reality as one undivided whole will allow the arrow to fly true.

Granted, kyudo is not all wise men and visionaries. It has its share of idiots who misuse the art and never learn its profound lessons. When I became interested in kyudo and was going on about its high philosophical importance, one Japanese friend told me about some moron who used his skills to send arrows through ducks in a Tokyo park. What's more, the mystics' idea that everything is really one "thing" is more of a theory or personal conviction than an established fact. Even if the master archers are right about what makes an arrow fly straight, we have no way of proving (or disproving) it yet.

The whole point of this essay is that kyudo is a sadly neglected art. Most of the people who were originally inspired by stories of saintly archers have found what they were looking for in different arts. Others have lost any sense of the martial arts being broad or deep. For them, self-defense *is* the martial arts, and "defensive" is something archery never has been and probably never will be. Shooting an arrow into someone from a distance couldn't be more offensive. To those extreme pragmatists among us, kyudo is just a fringe sport for eccentrics and upper-middle-class hobbyists. But it is really the Japanese martial arts ideal taken to its extreme. It is man

totally against himself. Hitting the target or not hitting it, having a vision of oneness or not having it depends solely on him.

Unfortunately, there is very little room for an insular, self-absorbed art like kyudo in our contemporary martial arts scene. And that is a shame because archery demonstrates clearly what is only implicit in rougher arts—that seeing deeply into things is the path to victory.

THE DARK SIDE

November 2000

My grandfather turns 90 this year. This is nothing special to anyone but me and my family. What makes him special is that he is one of many men who once fought in wars that are only words in history books now.

Like so many people in their final years, my grandfather's memory is starting to fade. That mysterious tangle of cells in his skull is coming apart, and a lifetime of memories is dissolving. It is the kind of end all good soldiers have earned, passing gently into the night after living a long and happy life. But for those of us that remain—the great majority of whom have never seen war—the passing of men like my grandfather is a great loss. They are the ones who keep us honest.

I was 14 when I first got caught up in the martial arts. I was fascinated by the shining steel of S-shaped *kris* knives and the seemingly endless variety of kung fu weapons. I remember the ninja sword, the black masks and the throwing stars that all of us had but none of us knew how to use. I remember being hungry to learn the dark secrets of the Asian warrior arts, something hidden beyond the physical world. I wanted some knowledge that made thoughts and sheer mental discipline superior to the actions of the body. It is the kind of ideal that haunts people well into adulthood, long after they should know better.

Through all this, my grandfather's silence was heavy as a stone. Occasionally he would shake his head and disapprove of my interest under his breath. But for the most part, my involvement in the martial arts earned me his silence.

At the time, I thought he was just small-minded and provincial. Like many men who fought in World War II, he was plucked out of his small-town life to serve in the Army. When he finished his career as a soldier, he returned to his small world and rarely left it for the next 55 years. It was even more rare to hear him speak of his time fighting in Europe.

To my young mind, my grandfather seemed too dim to understand the dark beauty and power of the martial arts that had seduced me. To him, I was like Adam in Paradise, innocent of the evil inherent in those shining knives. His silence was not that of an ignorant man. He understood violence and death better than I ever will. An honest man with only an eighth-grade education, he simply did not have the words to tell anyone the terrible truths about fighting that he knew.

At the time of this writing, I'm 30—the same age my grandfather was when he was drafted. As his memory dissolves, I'm now old enough to understand him—and I am ashamed of the obnoxious, cocksure boy I was. I am ashamed of the blustering in-your-face tough-guy posturing that we sometimes see in today's martial arts world. I am ashamed of all the talk of "lethal" and "deadly" techniques and of "one-punch kills."

I am ashamed of these things because they show how little we understand the needless tragedy of violence. As the memories of old soldiers fade, we forget how terrible real combat is. Whole generations grow up without understanding the blind hunger for conflict that burns inside them. They don't really understand where it leads or, worse yet, don't care. Most of us have never seen masses of men rushing headlong into the mouth of death like our grandfathers have. I count myself as one of those who incompletely understand the silence of old soldiers. It is the silence of those who were forced by circumstance to look long into those gaping jaws that can swallow everything.

What I do understand is this: We are teaching boys how to be men in *dojo* around the world. As we teach them how to fight, we must also teach them that fighting doesn't make or do anything good. At best, it stops bad things from happening. At worst, it can lead to people getting killed. As old soldiers like my grandfather pass into the twilight of old age, it's up to us to remember these things. No one should ever again have to learn those terrible truths of fighting the way our grandfathers did.

THE ENIGMA OF KENPO

December 2000

When people think of a martial art, they usually imagine one that is both aesthetically pleasing and effective in combat. Composed of punching, kicking, throwing and joint-manipulation techniques, the system should satisfy our eyes and minds as much as our self-defense needs. Of

course, the system should also be the product of a visionary warrior who, at some definite point in the past, was considered the ideal martial artist.

Although many styles of karate, kung fu and even *taekwondo* and *hapkido* fulfill these expectations, I think *kenpo* (or *kempo*) is closest to what many people have in mind when they think of an ideal martial art. Karate's sharp lines and overly formal rituals make it too militaristic for the hobbyist or closet mystic, while many styles of kung fu seem baroque and are thus perceived as inaccessible to all but the most devoted practitioners.

Conversely, *kenpo*—whose sequences often consist of an equal mix of straight and rounded techniques—avoids the harshness of karate and stylistic extremes of kung fu, thus keeping the art more in tune with the modern martial artist's imagination. In addition, *kenpo*'s origins are in stark contrast to those of karate and kung fu. Karate and kung fu, which ultimately developed in different directions, are products of the militaristic and aesthetic cultures,

respectively, in which they were born. *Kenpo*, on the other hand, was guided by the missionary zeal of its founders: Japan's Doshin So and America's Ed Parker.

Doshin So, the founder of *shorinji kempo*, claimed to have learned the art while he was in China working as a secret agent during World War II. Upon returning to Japan, he used his art to teach people how to get along with each other and become strong enough to stand up for what is right. But what was really unusual about So is that he made his art a religion: *Shorinji kempo* students are really Kongo Zen adepts who work to spread

PHOTO BY ROBERT W. YOUNG



Founded by Doshin So, *shorinji kempo* is as much a religion as it is a martial art.

So's ideals. Upper-ranking shorinji kempo instructors are priests and wear monks' robes in demonstrations. There's even a shorinji kempo temple in Shikoku, Japan, that is inhabited by monks. In short, shorinji kempo is a very modern, Japanese version of what the Shaolin tradition was like.

On the other hand, Parker's message was substantially different. Parker, who was greatly impressed with higher learning, believed it was important that his art be "rational." Consequently, he used logic, physics and grammar to define and promote American kenpo, and he considered earning an upper-*dan* rank in the art to be the equivalent of earning a doctorate in fighting. He envisioned a martial artist as a master of fighting in the Asian sense and a master of knowing in the rational, Western sense.

Despite their apparent differences, these men shared a common vision: They sought to change the world by giving us fighting skills and a deeper understanding of the martial arts. How much they succeeded in achieving this goal is debatable. Still, kenpo has a stronger hold on the martial imagination than do many other arts—and with good reason: Its founders had vision. They imbued their arts with a depth and breadth that shouldn't be taken lightly.

That is something that people rightly expect from the martial arts. But more important, it's something we should expect from ourselves.

EULOGY FOR ANDY HUG

January 2001

When a world-class athlete dies young, it seems like reality has been bent the wrong way.

Andy Hug was a great fighter to the very end of his career in the ring. A star of Japan's K-1 kickboxing event, Hug was the reigning champion of the World Muay Thai Council and the super-heavyweight champion of the United Kickboxing Association. He was looking forward to a much-deserved retirement when he was diagnosed with leukemia in August.

Only 35 when he died, Hug's passing shocked fight fans everywhere. Like football great Walter Payton, who died of a rare liver disease shortly after his own retirement, Hug was the picture of health and fitness throughout his life. His dying so young just doesn't seem right.

Men who push the limits of human ability and do what no one else can do are like demigods: They awaken a physical greatness in themselves that remains dormant in the rest of us. They become the heroes we just dream

of being but never become. Most of all, they embody the idea that we are masters of our own fate, that we can stave off death and disease and achieve great things through intense mental and physical effort.

But when brutal fate claims the life of an Andy Hug or a Walter Payton, it makes all this seem false. All that discipline and skill dissolve into air, and we are left with a gaping void. Of course, any feelings of grief that we might have about Hug's death are nothing compared to the loss his family is feeling. But I think it helps at times like this to remember what a fighter's life is about.

Any man who makes his living by fighting deals with the fear of death a little differently from the rest of us. While most men live with a constant, quiet anxiety about dying, fighters challenge it by embracing risk. They feel the same fears we do, but theirs are 10 times greater. Nevertheless, they master them. They challenge death every time they step into the ring.

In so doing, they win the satisfaction of knowing that their life—their will—is stronger than the dark inertia that stills everything. For that brief moment when their arms are raised in a “V” at the end of a match, they are saying, “I am!” In that God-like moment, all notions of death disappear and victory is like immortality.

Those who believe in an afterlife might say Andy Hug is in a better place now. That's because many people think of heaven as a place of comfort and rest, a place that is remote from the evil and toil of this world. But I believe that fighters prefer the kind of heaven where they can spend eternity facing and mastering those evils.

If there is an afterlife, I hope there is a Valhalla (“Hall of the Slain” in Nordic mythology) set aside for fighting men like Hug. Such fighters enjoy that kind of heaven only briefly in moments of victory, but having those sweet moments continue forever is the reward all of them deserve.

WHO DO YOU LOVE?

February 2001

Some martial artists' loyalty is amazing. In spite of the failures of their art, teachers or training partners, they remain devoted.

The obvious example of this is the art that fails the man who masters it. It's the cliché of the man who continues to practice *taekwondo* or karate after getting beaten to a pulp by an untrained fighter. It's the champion stand-up fighter who gets submitted easily by a journeyman grappler

after spending years doing full-contact competition, or the Brazilian *jiu-jitsu* fighter who takes his beating on the ground instead of standing up. These martial artists all share a devotion to their way of fighting despite its failures.

Sure, there are other reasons to remain devoted to an art besides its ideals. Sometimes people stick with an art because it's a lifestyle choice: They love the atmosphere of the *dojo* and the workout, and that's enough for them. Others invest so much time and energy in an art that it becomes their identity. Even if they lose a fight, they can't give it up. Many others stick with the art so they can strive toward an image of perfection that is rarely, if ever, reached. Finally, there are the traditional Asian artists who believe in the subtle power of knowledge that is ingrained in fighting technique, and the fighters who believe in the Olympian ideal of what fighting should be.

One of the places you can really see martial artists striving for an ideal is in the friendships that exist between training partners. This concept seems like a contradiction to people outside the arts, but if you practice punching heads and breaking bones with someone, he had better be your friend. You must be able to trust that your partner won't needlessly hurt you in training. The more intense and dangerous the training, the stronger the bond between training partners. As important as this practical wisdom is, it doesn't tell us why men would even want to relinquish the need to dominate and let up before someone gets seriously hurt. I think it's because of their shared devotion to an ideal that martial artists push each other so hard to become together what they could not become alone. In fact, sometimes these relationships become so intense that training elsewhere or changing styles becomes more than just a breach of trust; it's almost an apostasy.

The loyalty students give bad instructors is the dark side of martial artists' devotion to ideals. Sometimes a stingy instructor teaches his art in pieces because he's afraid his students will get better than he is and leave him. Sometimes an ignorant instructor masquerades as a stingy one. He teaches bits and pieces of his art because that's all he knows, yet he always hints that he knows more. But the worst is the abusive instructor who puts his students through needlessly harsh practices, then beats them up in sparring and accuses anyone who quits of being not serious about training.

I believe students stay with a bad instructor because the stature of an art makes him seem more capable or knowledgeable than he actually is.



Some students stick with their martial art not because it is the most lethal style on the planet but because they love the atmosphere of the training hall.

It's easy to see a man who wears outdated Chinese garb and quotes ancient holy men as being identical with the Shaolin legacy. Furthermore, if he's the only instructor in town, students will stick with him because they prefer to learn a bad example of their art to none at all.

But people who stay in the martial arts for any length of time eventually find their way past bad teachers and the shortcomings of their arts. Even if they fail to find a good teacher, good students eventually become the answer they are looking for.

THE DARK SIDE OF FULL-CONTACT FIGHTING

March 2001

Anyone who loves full-contact fighting is aware of its dark side: crippling, sometimes fatal brain damage. There are other devastating injuries a fighter can suffer. Limbs can be fractured so badly they can never be used again. Eyes can be blinded. Necks and backs can be broken and leave fighters paralyzed. But nothing is worse than serious brain damage.

I don't want to minimize the severity of the other injuries, for being confined to a wheelchair or losing your sight is terrible. But no matter how bad these injuries are, the fighters who suffer them are still fundamentally the same people. Muhammad Ali may be unable to move or speak normally because of his Parkinson's disease, but he has no intellectual deficits. He is still the same quick-witted, charming and deeply religious man he always was. Fighters who suffer the worst kinds of brain damage aren't even there anymore.

Sometimes they aren't there in the ultimate sense. Older boxing fans remember a Korean fighter named Kim Duk-koo dying from a brain hemorrhage after losing to Ray "Boom Boom" Mancini in 1982. More recently, in 1998 Douglas Dedge became the first no-holds-barred fighter to die from the beating he took. So dying from brain damage is a risk all full-contact fighters take. But even fighters who survive severe concussions and hemorrhages often aren't there anymore.

Some former fighters suffer from a chronic condition known as boxer's dementia. I say "former fighters" because it's a disease that takes many years to reach its final stages. In the first stage, a fighter experiences slight memory problems and a mild lack of coordination. In the second stage, he develops paranoid ideas, mild speech impediments and a resting tremor. In the third and final stage, serious speech difficulties, a disabling lack of

coordination and a general cognitive decline are common. Jerry Quarry, a former heavyweight contender and one-time Ali opponent, was a perfect example of a fighter's cognitive decline. A couple years before his death, he was asked what he was famous for. The world-famous boxer replied, "Playing football."

So this is the real dark side of pro fighting. When a former fighter develops dementia, he loses more than motor function. He loses what is more "him" than anything else. The person he was recedes into a deepening fog. All that is left is a blank stare and a familiar voice.

Because NHB and other full-contact martial arts are still young sports, we don't know whether they will lead to the same chronic brain damage as pro boxing. But we can definitely learn some things from studies of boxer's dementia that can help prevent martial artists from developing it.

The first lesson is obvious: Fighters should retire before they lose their skills. But personal pride and the lure of big paydays keep many people fighting well past age 35. What many fighters don't know—or don't care about—is the strong correlation between length of career and dementia. That is, the longer you fight, the more likely you are to lose your mind.

Second, any fighter who has lost 10 fights should not be fighting. There is a strong correlation between the number of fights lost and dementia. Studies have found that pro boxers who lost 10 or more fights were the most likely to develop dementia. That is simply because the loser takes more punishment and sustains more damage.

Third, all full-contact fighters should get MRIs on a regular basis. These examinations are the most sensitive to brain lesions. Any fighter who shows significant lesions should be forced to retire.

I truly hope that martial arts fighters don't suffer the same tragedy that boxers have. For the most part, NHB and kickboxing careers are brief. What's more, NHB fighters generally don't take as many punches as boxers do. But I do worry about guys like Oleg Taktarov—who has taken a lot of punches in NHB fights—and Maurice Smith—who continues to fight top competitors even though he's in his 40s. For their sake, and the sake of all the other fighters out there, I hope that full-contact fighting proves safer than boxing.

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A HERO

April 2001

In childhood, everyone knows what a hero is. He's the good guy we want to see beat up or outsmart the bad guy. He's the one who fights for people who can't defend themselves or saves everyone by doing something perilous. Sometimes he's even a tragic hero who sacrifices himself for the common good. In other words, a hero is a man of action—the kind of righteous action that young men long to be a part of.

As we age, our notion of what a hero is changes. We become aware of other points of view and the cold, hard fact of mortality, and gradually all that action becomes less heroic. A knight in shining armor or a samurai in full battle gear becomes a violent member of a long-gone oppressive upper class. A professional fighter becomes just some tough guy who beats people up for money, and a soldier at war—no matter how good his cause—is still a professional killer.

Older and chastened by what we've learned, we retreat from childhood notions of what is heroic. Most of us spend our life in quiet, sedentary jobs, trying to be happy and do no harm. Action movies and epic books become guilty pleasures. As the real "action" of our life is relegated to making a living and life slowly becomes smaller and emptier, our triumphs are measured in paychecks and promotions instead of victories won with our own hands. Heroism becomes a



PHOTO BY ROBERT W. YOUNG

In the martial arts, the hero is not the person who masters his opponent; he is the person who masters himself.

word reserved for emergency rescues and civil-rights activities.

But in the paradox of the martial arts, we find a heroism that is strangely compatible with modern life. The martial arts are about heroic action in its classic form: hand-to-hand fighting. But it is an action that doesn't exist for the sake of glory alone. Rather, it is an odd corner of human experience where we recognize fighting as wrong but still do it in the training hall and find deep meaning in it.

In this case, the hero is not just the guy who fights and wins but also the person who has fought and mastered himself. He is the man who has trained well enough to triumph on the street or in the ring. But he is also the man who has triumphed over the love of fighting. A martial arts hero is one who wins without dwelling on glory or revenge. He embraces the good and bad sides of human nature and sees both with an equal eye. In other words, a martial arts hero still confronts bad guys, defends the weak and so on, but he also recognizes the action of fighting as inherently negative and, therefore, balances the good he has done with the bad and does not glory in it.

All of this may seem far removed from the average martial artist's experience. Many people think of their martial arts practice as a lifestyle choice or an involving hobby. But I think the heroic element is there in the struggle to be a good fighter—the inherent cruelty of which leads men to recognize their worst qualities and marry them to their best qualities.

It doesn't matter which art a person practices or how great he is at it. Every time someone becomes a skilled fighter and by some flash of insight is disturbed by what he has accomplished, he has begun the heroic conflict with himself. In the end, he becomes the only kind of physical hero possible in modern life: the one who is his own opposite.

KAZUSHI SAKURABA AND THE TAKADA DOJO, PART 1

May 2001

Back in the early days of the Ultimate Fighting Championship, nothing turned out the way we expected. The first dominant no-holds-barred fighter wasn't a well-muscled athlete or a karate master. It was Royce Gracie, a thin *jiu-jitsu* fighter from Brazil. His victories kept many martial artists' anxiety levels high for a few years and fueled some heated debates about what NHB fighting really proves. At the time, I remember *Black Belt* editor Robert W. Young wryly noting that no one would be getting worked

up about the UFC if a 40-year-old Asian kung fu master was beating everybody. I agreed with him, but I also wondered how people would react when there finally was an Asian man beating everybody. Well, the closest we have to that in the NHB world today is Kazushi Sakuraba—and he's not at all what we expected, either.

Sakuraba is the most successful Japanese competitor in NHB fighting today. He has fought and beaten a host of Brazilian fighters, including Marcus Silveira and Vitor Belfort. But Sakuraba's specialty is beating Gracies. After kicking the bejesus out of a smaller Royler Gracie, he forced Royce Gracie to throw in the towel after an hour and a half of fighting in the PRIDE Grand Prix 2000, dislocated Renzo Gracie's arm in the last minute of a very close bout and easily decisioned an injured Ryan Gracie. Admittedly, Sakuraba's fights haven't always been spectacular: His fight with Alan Goes was a draw, and he looked awkward against last-minute substitute Guy Mezger. But right now, he is on a tear through the under-200-pound division.

Given his success and his nationality, you'd expect Sakuraba to be a traditional martial artist. But he's not. He's not a judo or karate man. He



PHOTO BY ROBERT W. YOUNG

Never one to take his sport too seriously, Kazushi Sakuraba donned a pro-wrestling mask before greeting Antonio Inoki before his PRIDE Grand Prix 2000 bout.

is a wrestler. Then he must be a freestyle or Greco-Roman wrestler like the American NHB champs, right? Wrong. Sakuraba is a pro wrestler. He may have started in freestyle wrestling, but he attributes his submission skills to his studio wrestling training. Sakuraba got into NHB fighting only because the pro-wrestling entertainment company he worked for went bankrupt.

It is a delicious irony that Japan's most successful fighter is a pro wrestler. Those of us raised on traditional karate and the earthy morality of judo expect Japanese fighters to be more like old martial arts parables. We expect high-minded, wise men—something like Stoics or Jedi knights. Instead, we get Sakuraba showing up for a pre-fight press conference in a diaper or dying his hair bright red before a fight just because a comedian dared him to. But Sakuraba's irony really comes through in his encounters with the Gracies.

Even though guys like Royce, Royler and Renzo Gracie have a reputation for being good-natured, they exude a masculine pride when it comes to fighting. Renzo Gracie has compared NHB matches to duels, and I imagine that's how seriously all the Gracies take their bouts. But Sakuraba has a comic soul that seems to be inseparable from his fighting skill. He seems to fight his matches with the air of playing a practical joke on his opponents—like when Sakuraba held Royce Gracie upside down by his belt with his legs splayed open for the camera, or when he literally spanked Ryan Gracie at the end of their match. Can anyone imagine Rickson Gracie, with his fierce dignity, gleefully spanking an opponent? Probably not, and I think that's one of Sakuraba's secret weapons: When fighting skill is equal, wit wins over pride.

I count myself as one of the people who take the martial arts seriously, maybe too seriously. That's why I like Sakuraba and why I think he is the best thing that's happened to the martial arts since Royce Gracie first came on the scene. He wreaks havoc with our expectations—first with our expectation of what a Japanese fighter should be and then with our idea of the cruel seriousness of NHB fighting. He does this convincingly because he is so successful in the ring and because, unlike other great fighters, he seems genuinely unable to take his success seriously. Maybe that's the gift of considering yourself a pro wrestler above all other things. Even a real fight, like so many things we consider real in life, is just a show and who you really are isn't affected by it.

KAZUSHI SAKURABA AND THE TAKADA DOJO, PART 2

June 2001

Right now, the Takada Dojo is one of the hubs of the no-holds-barred-fighting scene. The home of popular Japanese pro wrestlers and NHB fighters like Nobuhiko Takada, Daijiro Matsui and Naoki Sano, it is best-known for producing Brazilian *jiu-jitsu's* most frustrating opponent, Kazushi Sakuraba.

The Takada Dojo was founded in 1998 by Takada, a big-time wrestler. He is best-known outside Japan for his widely publicized fights with Rickson Gracie. Although he lost both matches, he helped raise NHB fighting to a new level by bringing his celebrity status to the ring. Furthermore, he has won the respect of Japanese fans for taking on tough opponents. Takada may not always win, but you can forgive him when you see the list of his opponents: Rickson Gracie, Royce Gracie, Mark Kerr, Mark Coleman



Kazushi Sakuraba (rear) and Daijiro Matsui are two of the popular fighters who train at the Takada Dojo in western Tokyo.

(whom Takada beat), Igor Vovchanchyn and heavyweight boxer Trevor Berbick (whom he also beat).

The *dojo* sits in an inconspicuous part of west Tokyo called Koyama. As you walk to it, you pass pachinko parlors, food mongers, girlie bars and a host of small stores, all tightly packed together. After about three blocks and a few turns, there it is: a little office at ground level above a big basement gym.

The Takada Dojo bills itself as a pro-wrestling gym. In fact, part of its merchandising is selling T-shirts of Takada with cartoon bubbles above his head insisting he is a pro wrestler above all other things. Pro-wrestling gym it may be, but that means something very different in Japan.

Over here, there is no sharp distinction between pro fighters and sports entertainers. I don't think fight fans in the United States really want or expect Hulk Hogan or Bret Hart to fight guys like Royce Gracie or Mike Tyson, but that would be the American equivalent of what Takada and his team are doing—which makes Sakuraba's success all the more astonishing.

While Takada's school is a pro-wrestling gym, it's not just a place where you learn to do pile-drivers and back flips off the top rope. Rather, it's a fighting gym that follows Takada's ideal of being a total fighter and features aerobics and weight training, as well as an impressive list of instructors in boxing, kickboxing, amateur wrestling and submission wrestling. Former Japanese lightweight champion Toshikatzu Suzuki teaches boxing there; and Kenichi Sato, a current welterweight kickboxing and Shidokan tournament champion, teaches striking. But the grappling instructors are the reason most people seek out the school.

The main wrestling instructors are the fighters, including PRIDE and King of the Cage veteran Daijiro Matsui, Naoki Sano—who is famous for his fights with Carlos Newton and Royler Gracie—and, of course, Sakuraba. They teach a combination of freestyle, Greco-Roman and submission-wrestling techniques, but the best thing about these fighters/instructors is that they are always there. Unlike some gyms where you may see the big names once in a blue moon, teenagers who want to be the next generation of fighters get to roll with Sakuraba every Sunday.

One final note: This month, they announced that former Team Kerr fighter and jiu-jitsu phenom Ricco Rodriguez had joined the roster of Takada Dojo fighters. At 23, Rodriguez is already a PRIDE veteran and a King of the Cage heavyweight champ. So the future looks bright for this gym. With the collective experience of their current fighters, the almost magical ability of Sakuraba and the power of a young Rodriguez, the Takada Dojo is set to become a no-holds-barred powerhouse.

THE VIRTUES OF MARTIAL ARTS FILMS

July 2001

Martial arts movies are my guilty pleasure. That may not be much of a confession in a martial arts magazine because it's a pleasure—and maybe a guilt—that most of us share. But it's still something I generally keep to myself when the subject of movies comes up.

The reason I feel guilty for liking martial arts movies is because, frankly, they're just plain bad. The plots are usually predictable, the acting is poor and the dialogue is laughable or purely functional, a way of getting from one fight scene to another. In fact, people who think of film as an art form put martial arts and action films in the same category as porn and horror flicks: cheap, ugly spectacles of bodies doing things to bodies. But that doesn't stop lots of martial arts people—myself included—from watching kung fu theater.

Martial arts movies may often be bad cinema, but they definitely fulfill a need. They are one of the last places where we get to see moral drama or heroic action. The good guy wins in the end and is rewarded with the admiration of a community and the love of a beautiful woman. Even if all the hero does is win fights that he shouldn't be able to, that's good enough. What we see is reality as it *could* be, not as it really is.

I'm not saying that the over-the-top violence in martial arts movies is desirable in real life, but in the characters' motives we recognize things we crave. We need these movies because we need morality to be rewarded. We need justice and we need to have heroes. But these are things we rarely get.

In real life, social acceptance is the reward for living a moral life. Justice is something we pay cops and courts to mete out, and heroic action is an oxymoron. It may be the stuff of real life, but it makes bad fiction. The last thing someone feeling hemmed in by life wants to see is a depressing film about other people also being hemmed in—or worse still, defeated—by life.

Some people will be quick to point out that martial arts films are so far from reality that they are not about ideals but escapism. That may be true. Many people live lives they'd love to escape from. If a ridiculous kung fu movie helps them forget their troubles for a while and live vicariously through a cartoonlike hero, so be it. But I think there's more to it than simple escape.

What martial arts fans are looking for in martial arts movies is the same thing they're looking for in martial sports and in the *dojo*. They're looking for a vision of the way things could be, a vision of extraordinary human

ability. They want to be witness to—sometimes even a part of—a victory over complacency and dull circumstance. They want to see actors, athletes or even themselves confirm the fact that their ideals are true and the dark inertia of normal life is false.

It's true that movies often stray over the border that separates the extraordinary from the supernatural. But that's easily forgivable. They are still works of imagination, not documentaries. What's more, they don't condescend to give us a trenchant social message. They feed an honest hunger.

So when I go to the video store tonight, I may linger for a while around the serious movies I'm supposed to watch, the ones that will make me a better person. But I know that eventually I'll end up deciding between *Enter the Dragon*, *The Karate Kid* and some anonymous ninja flick. I'll watch them and enjoy them, and I may even come away a better person for it.

THE AGONY OF DEFEAT

August 2001

One of my favorite quotes from Muhammad Ali is, "You can't just go and die because you lose!" He said it after his loss to Leon Spinks, the only time he ever lost his title in the ring. Ali was old and out of shape, and he got knocked around by a fighter who would never become great. It was one of the most embarrassing losses in boxing history.

I like the quote because it sums up defeat so well. Ali said you can't just die, and he was right. But it also shows that's what he really felt like doing. Losing a fight might not seem life-changing to most of us; but to a fighter, especially the "Greatest of All Time," it is unbearable.

In many martial arts, we don't really deal with defeat. It's the kind of thing we get philosophical about. Talk about winning and losing quickly leads to talk about the "true spirit" of the martial arts, which usually means character-building or self-discovery. We reason our way to a point of view in which winning and losing are incidental, and there is an element of truth in this. But there is also something evasive about it.

Unlike winning—which is just more of the same for a talented athlete—losing can change your life. It's a forced humility in the worst sense. You are physically mastered by another man. For stand-up fighters like Ali, it means taking a wicked beating. Anyone who has experienced it knows there are few things more soul-crushing than getting pummeled by a talented striker and not being able to do much about it. When you lose a fight, it

means someone has proved to you that you were weak and helpless when you were trying your best to display your strength and skill. It's the kind of thing no amount of careful reasoning can make you feel better about.

Some instructors act as though they are above feeling these emotions. When a student is angry and frustrated about losing a match, they see it as an opportunity to preach. What follows is often a condescending speech about how joy at winning or anger at losing is the result of ignorance about the true nature of the martial arts. Like I said, there is an element of truth in this, and that's what makes it tempting. But it disregards the fact that these feelings exist, even for the most enlightened minds.

Losing is painful in such a fundamental way that it is dishonest to treat this pain like ignorance. A good instructor will acknowledge his student's humiliation and help him rearrange himself in a way that will let him succeed later.

What did Ali do after losing to Spinks? He pushed his 36-year-old body as hard as he could for six months and got into top shape. He fought 200 rounds with sparring partners and perfected a simple but effective game plan. Then he met Spinks in a rematch and won back the heavyweight title by a unanimous decision to become the first person in history to be the heavyweight champion of the world three times.

Ali's victory makes the full quote after his first fight with Spinks that much more inspiring: "We all lose in life. You lose your wife; you lose your mother. We all have losses, and what you have to do is keep living, overcome those losses and come back. You can't just go and die because you lose."

RICKSON GRACIE

September 2001

Rickson Gracie is a tough guy to write about. That's partly because so much has been written about him in the past decade that there simply isn't much we can say about him that hasn't been said already. But the big reason it's hard to write about him is that he has become a living legend.

When a fighter becomes legendary, it's hard to see him clearly. No matter how much genuine skill they have, guys like Gracie are always clothed in our expectations. We see what we want—or need—to see more than we see the actual fighter.

In Gracie's case, people want to see a Brazilian *jiu-jitsu* champion. By champion, I don't just mean a guy who wins *jiu-jitsu* tournaments. What

people want to see is someone who supports and defends jiu-jitsu's ideals. For all its emphasis on practical skill, Brazilian jiu-jitsu is still jujutsu. It's still a "gentle art" when you compare it with other fighting arts. It's an art in which winning doesn't mean destroying. That's what Gracie is a champion of.

But Gracie is not everyone's champion. A lot of people who love fighting think he has a seriously overinflated reputation. His critics point out that he doesn't fight much, and when he does, it's never against a top fighter. For instance, Gracie fought a great bout with former Pancrase champ Masakatsu Funaki; but because Funaki also lost to Ken Shamrock and Bas Rutten, people who doubt Gracie's greatness remained unimpressed.

But is any of this really fair? When jiu-jitsu's true believers pass around stories about Gracie's invincibility, they are talking more about their need for a martial arts superhero. When critics dismiss him, what they're really dismissing is a kind of heroic idealism they find smug and self-important. Both are more about a fighter's image and our own psychology than about the man himself.

What can we honestly say about Gracie that most people will agree with? We can say he is a talented but aging Brazilian jiu-jitsu master who still risks his reputation in the ring. The fact that they are calculated risks may gall some purists, but I think Gracie is just careful about whom he might lose to.

We all know in our hearts that only a legend can replace a legend; anything else is just a "win." When Wallid Ismail beat Royce Gracie, it wasn't a passing of the mantle of excellence. It was a sad loss, and the fallen champ retained our sympathy and respect. Ismail just couldn't fill the gap left in our imaginations once he dethroned Royce Gracie. But Royce Gracie's loss to Kazushi Sakuraba was the kind that Rickson Gracie seems willing to risk. It's the kind of loss that doesn't minimize the achievements of a great fighter.

When Rickson Gracie finally becomes too old to fight, it will be a sad day for the no-holds-barred world. It will be like when Muhammad Ali retired from boxing. Love him or hate him, Rickson Gracie is the one truly larger-than-life figure in the martial arts world today. We can only hope a new legend will arrive to replace him. Otherwise, much like boxing after Ali, NHB might shrink in both size and importance.

WHAT'S HIDDEN IN KATA?

October 2001

A lot of time and energy in the martial arts world is devoted to explaining *kata*. In fact, interpreting forms and discovering (or rediscovering) the secret techniques that are hidden in them has become a cottage industry. There are seminars, videotapes and books—some of them even have the word “encyclopedia” in the title—that claim to show us the real meaning of all those complicated routines. But the simple fact that there are so many different interpretations of the same forms makes even the beginning student wary. Everybody can't be right. Right?

The problem is that it's so hard to prove anyone wrong. Forms are usually ambiguous. The techniques that are there don't always leap out at you. They're often there in a partial or condensed form. So anyone with a little imagination and some martial arts experience can tease some techniques out of a form. It may not be what the master who created the form intended, but it is hard to prove that's the case.

This is especially true with martial arts that are no longer used for practical purposes. Who in modern times really knows the value of the techniques gleaned from a sword form? We can consult history books and trace the lineage of modern masters to see whose styles really are descended from a renowned swordsman. But modern *kenjutsu* masters are custodians of knowledge. Nobody in our day can say with the certainty of a medieval sword master which of those techniques are battle-tested and which are just wishful thinking.

But what about the classical or neoclassical forms that we still use today? Who's right about them? Are the routines we do in karate and kung fu classes just stylized punch, kick, trap and takedown combinations, or is there something else hidden there? Are there pressure-point skills concealed in them? Are there death touches?

Honestly, I don't know. But when it comes to figuring out kata, I follow one major rule: You shouldn't try to explain a move as a complicated, secret technique when there is a simpler explanation. There may be something hidden in a kata, but often an outside block is just an outside block and a punch is really just a punch. A form has to suggest in some way that there is more there than meets the eye. Otherwise, we're making easy things needlessly hard and wasting our efforts.

Part of the reason we're so interested in all this new interpretation of forms is because the years have not been kind to kata. In the early 1970s,

Bruce Lee made a strong argument that practicing fixed forms of combat was inherently wrong. It's an argument that hasn't really been challenged. What's more, modern no-holds-barred fighters haven't done traditional martial arts the courtesy of arguing against this belief. They simply ignore deep stances, kata and heavy moralizing while they beat each other into submission. They don't pay attention to forms-based martial arts because those arts have given them no reason to pay attention. So now that kata practice has been seriously called into question, we look for something beneath the surface—something to redeem both our interest in forms and their status in the martial arts world.

Lee once compared secret moves to yellow leaves offered as gold coins to children to stop their crying. That may be a little harsh, but there is an element of truth to it. The promise of deep secrets is what keeps many people in the martial arts, and sometimes that means the promise of something buried in our forms. The reason I think Lee's analogy was harsh is because the mere search for those secrets, whether they exist or not, is noble enough. Along the way, we learn the simple truths, the basics of self-discovery and self-defense, before we push for the hidden secrets. We learn what is reasonable so that we can know what is fantastic.

MAKE IT LAST

November 2001

Tradition is alternately praised and damned in the martial arts. It's praised because not much of anything survives the forces of time and nature. If a fighting art can survive relatively intact for more than a century, it has something of enduring value in it. But tradition is often damned because it fosters complacency. It allows a person to feel happy with a received wisdom instead of having to think for himself. But somewhere in both points of view is a love for things that last.

People who are drawn to traditional martial arts obviously feel this way. They find inspiration in being part of a lineage of skill and wisdom that includes great warriors of the past. They find purpose in continuing a tradition that stretches back a score of generations and will likely continue many generations into the future. Traditional martial artists carry the power and dignity of a truth that has, in some respects, conquered time. The problem is that not everything that lasts is true.

For some people, the only good tradition in the fighting arts is trial

by fire. This means questioning all received wisdom, criticizing all techniques according to contemporary standards and challenging anyone who claims to have mastered a system to prove it by fighting. This may seem like simple insolence or a childish love of destroying things that aren't understood, but many martial artists who are like this don't really despise things that last. Rather, they challenge everything because they *want* to find something that lasts. They want to eliminate what they consider to be mistakes or accidents of history until they find something they can count on, something that is true.

The only problem with the trial-by-fire approach is that it is completely reductive. You can strip away everything that seems useless or dated and end up with what you think is core knowledge. But then what? Even if you have discovered some basic truths about fighting, it's only a beginning. Like all great martial artists of the past, even the fiercest reductionist gradually builds a martial art from what he has discovered. Eventually, he will be challenged, too, and then discover how enduring his truth really is.

Whether you're a traditional martial artist or one of the challengers, you have the same enemy: time. When the year 2100 or 2200 rolls around, how many of our well-preserved traditions will still exist? How much will remain of the arts their brash challengers created? The idea of having one's efforts lost in the long, slow grind of time should outrage anyone, but for people trying to taste eternity through an art that defends and preserves life, it is especially galling.

If you're a pure existentialist, none of this bothers you. You live your life, prosper as much as you can, create your own meaning and take it to your grave. But there is something in most martial artists that rebels against this, something that wants to discover a lasting truth instead of inventing personal meaning, something that wants to defeat time instead of accepting its victory as inevitable.

For those who really love their martial art and want it to endure, there is only one choice: Think in terms of centuries, not years or decades. Look to what has already survived the judgment of time and learn from it. Challenge the prejudices of our age by the light of ideas that have the power to outlast it. But most of all, don't accept yourself as a single person who is isolated in time and without impact. Whether you accept traditions or rebel against them, you are a bridge between the past and the future. You make it last.

A DIFFERENT POINT OF VIEW

December 2001

Living abroad has different effects on different people. But one thing it always does is force expatriates to see their own culture from a different point of view. You might not sympathize with these different points of view, but you find out that people in different places may have very different feelings about the same things.

I have lived in Japan for a couple years, and it has provided a number of expected cultural differences like a heavy emphasis on teamwork and seniority in the workplace, and a generally high level of politeness in social contacts. But one of the things I was unprepared for was a reversal in the way people view the martial arts.

In the United States and Europe, the traditional Asian arts have a mystique about them. They are quite different from fighting sports like boxing and wrestling. For a long time, the Japanese martial arts have existed in the West as a package of strange words, ideas and movements that have a charisma all their own. So I assumed that they had the same effect on the Japanese imagination.

The truth is that while a lot of people still practice the traditional martial arts in Japan, they don't seem to have a cultlike attraction. Traditional arts seem like respected museum pieces, and the people who maintain them are equally respected. What is lacking is anything like the fascination with them that foreigners have. In fact, it's quite the reverse. It seems that many Japanese are more interested in foreign fighting sports than traditional arts. Wrestling in particular has a numinous quality here.

Many grappling and no-holds-barred groups in Japan look to ancient Greece and its long-extinct art of *pankration* for inspiration. Shooto, the popular mixed-martial arts group, bills itself as "the way to modern pankration." Likewise, Yuki Nakai's breakaway shootwrestling/Brazilian *jiu-jitsu* group Paraestra takes its (misspelled) name from the circular antechamber of ancient Greek gymnasiums. As for Mas Funaki's Pancrase organization, which spawned the careers of fighters like Ken Shamrock and Bas Rutten, the connection to pankration is obvious.

This fascination with wrestling and the revival of pankration is a lot like our fascination with Asian martial arts. If you were a wrestling champion in the United States 20 years ago, it was something worthy of respect, but wrestling was so commonplace that it wouldn't have sparked much interest. But if you were a karate or judo champion, that was different. Not many

people knew the difference between those two arts except that they were foreign, and because they were the products of a drastically different time and place, they had an otherworldly quality to them. With many Japanese, however, it's the reverse. Karate and judo are ordinary, and it's wrestling that is the modern link to an ancient, exotic and fascinating martial art.

This reversal of points of view—seeing something as familiar as wrestling as exotic in Japanese eyes—is just one of the many changes a martial



PHOTO BY FERNANDO ESCOBAR

Ken Shamrock (left, with Vernon White) is one of the biggest fighters to emerge from Japan's Pancrase organization.

artist goes through here. But I wanted to bring up this one in particular because it might help us understand foreign instructors.

When I think about my surprise at the Japanese view of wrestling and pankration, I wonder whether the first Japanese, Korean and Chinese instructors to arrive in the United States were puzzled by the Americans' almost religious fascination with something the instructors thought was commonplace. I wonder how much they struggled with being honest about their arts and how much they were tempted to cater to the exotic imagination of their new country.

At any rate, I imagine many Japanese fighters will continue to search for a way to modern pankration through wrestling. Likewise, many occidentals will continue to search for effortless power through traditional Asian arts. Maybe if they both follow their arts to the source, they'll be able to look back on the things they took for granted back home and see something special by looking at them through foreign eyes.

FIGHTING IN THE AMATEUR PRIDE TOURNAMENT

January 2002

Sometimes you've just got to do something risky. If you don't, you end up being one of those martial artists who are all theory and no practice. Some guys do bare-knuckle karate, while others gear up for kickboxing or submission grappling. Some extremists even take to full-contact stick fighting with only fencing masks and hockey gloves. But for me, amateur no-holds-barred competition always seemed the most interesting.

On September 2, 2001, I took part in the amateur version of Japan's PRIDE Fighting Championships. The tournament, called Pre-PRIDE 3, was an eight-man, open-weight-class event sponsored by Tokai Television. The whole point of this Tokyo-based tournament is to give amateur fighters a shot at a big-time, professional career. Pre-PRIDE winners usually receive an invitation to fight in California's King of the Cage event, and for Japanese fighters, that means being one step away from fighting in Japan's arena-filling PRIDE tournament.

My goals were a little more modest. I wanted to win the Pre-PRIDE tournament and maybe compete in a few low-level professional bouts before I got too old to do it anymore. But there are no arenas in my future. I never had any illusions about fighting at the level of the PRIDE professionals. I'm a 31-year-old writer, not a world-class fighter.

At any rate, part of the deal with Pre-PRIDE is that you train with big-name fighters at one of the famous Tokyo gyms. Then Tokai television shows up with cameras at regular intervals to film you, ask you questions and interview your famous coach. Mostly, they try to show the amateurs learning from their idols, but they also develop human-interest stories and rivalries. Like all fights that end up on television, Pre-PRIDE is as much a show as it is an NHB tournament.

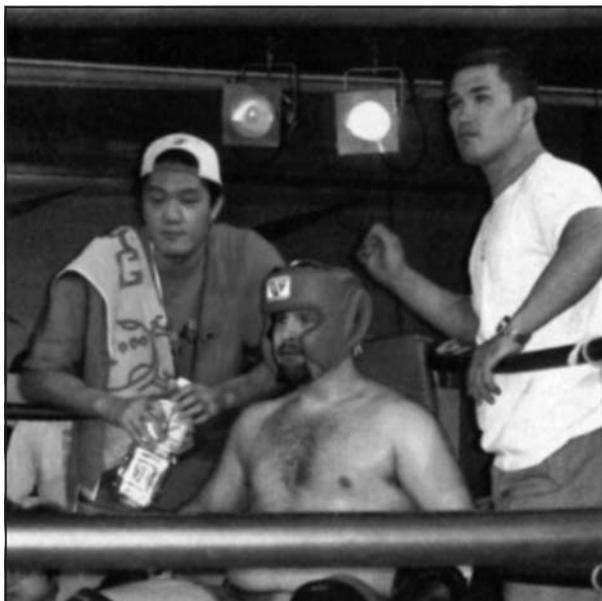
The gym I train at is the Takada Dojo, home of “Gracie-killer” Kazushi Sakuraba and celebrity pro-wrestler Nobuhiko Takada. The guy in my corner was Daijiro Matsui, who is well-known to PRIDE fans. He’s the tough man of that tournament and has gone the distance with fighters who normally destroy other great fighters. For instance, Matsui took Vitor Belfort, Wanderlei Silva and Carlos Newton to decisions. He may not always win, but he has weathered some of the worst storms you’ll ever see in the ring and has never been submitted. So I put a lot of faith in his judgment.

My training consisted of submission wrestling, kickboxing and boxing, along with some cardio and weight training. Because I’m a better striker than grappler, I spent a lot of time working on my endurance so I could last through three fights and keep landing hard punches. In submission wrestling, I concentrated on defending against takedowns, reversing bad positions on the ground, and getting and holding good positions. My strategy was simple: I was going to do anything to get to a place—either standing or on the ground—where I could punch my opponent.

Most of the other guys in Pre-PRIDE 3 came from other famous gyms. But one fighter was also from the Takada Dojo: a wrestler and bodybuilder named Yoshihiro Sugiyama. He and I knew each other before we ended up in this tournament. He was one of the original members of the Takada Dojo and a good wrestler who had trained under PRIDE veterans for four years, but his strength was also a big factor because of his bodybuilding. Sugiyama’s main weakness was that he really didn’t have any striking experience. So if we ended up fighting each other, he was just as worried about me decking him standing up as I was about him pounding me from the mount.

After a few months of training and a few appearances on television, it was time to fight. The tournament was at a Tokyo night spot called Club Atom. Fighters wore strange outfits and walked to the ring with theme music, just like in the professional PRIDE tournament. For instance, one guy entered in a cowboy costume and another came in a pink robe with his hair dyed pink. I didn’t have a funny costume, but I did put on a scowl and stalk

PHOTO COURTESY OF KEITH VARGO



Keith Vargo (center) waits for the match to begin, while Daijiro Matsui (right) sizes up the opposition.

to the ring with LL Cool J's "Mama Said Knock You Out" blaring over the sound system. I was playing the role of the scary foreigner.

They announced our matchups just before the tournament started. I was fighting in the first match—against the guy with the pink hair. Sugiyama told me to watch out for his triangle choke.

I was nervous, but it didn't really hit me until I was standing

in the ring. I've fought in other kinds of tournaments before, and I expected to be nervous. What I didn't expect was that the cameras made me 10 times more nervous than I thought I'd be. When the bell rang for the first round, I was wound tighter than a golf ball. In fact, the weirdest thing about hearing the bell and stepping to the center of the ring was realizing that *I* was the one doing it.

I tried to beat his pink head as much as I could, and he tried to clinch and take me down. After I won some standing exchanges, he scored a takedown. On the ground, I rolled him off me and got the mount. The ref stopped it because of the face punches I was landing, and I won by TKO in less than five minutes.

My next fight was against a kickboxer from Ochiai's gym. He was a little lighter than I was, but he was also younger and had a lot of experience as a bouncer in Tokyo's wild Roppongi district. I then began to notice how much my first fight had drained me. When I got to the corner, I was nervous again from the cameras but too fatigued to fight against it.

After giving some brief strategic advice, Matsui grabbed me by the gloves, pulled my arms out and shook them to loosen me up. The whole time he kept repeating, "Keith-san, relax. Relax. Relax." In my fatigued

state, it was hypnotic. If Matsui had told me I was a chicken, I probably would have clucked.

I started my second fight relaxed and ready but still tired. Going for a good position, I fought my way through his punches and kicks and pinned him to the ropes, leaning on him and punching. I was trying to slowly wear him down with punches and rack up points. If I couldn't finish him, I wanted to make sure I got a decision. The fight ended on the ground with me holding the side position and punching anywhere he didn't protect. After 11 minutes, I won a judges' decision.

In the meantime, Sugiyama had easily beat his first two opponents. Both times he clinched and threw, got the top position and tried some submissions, then gave up and pounded them into submission. Both bouts ended during the first round. In contrast, I had already fought for 15 minutes.

By the time we met for the final fight, I was a lot more tired than Sugiyama. So my first priority was to keep him off me and prevent him from taking me down. I was hoping that he would get tired and that his guard would drop so I could start landing punches on his jaw. It worked for the first round and part of the second. At one point, I even managed to put together some sloppy combinations and daze him. But Sugiyama hung in there and got a reversal on the ground. I had to go to the guard twice and hang onto him to last until the end of the fight. The decision went to Sugiyama.

Despite having taken second place, I'm pleased with my performance. I'm proud because I got in the ring and did it. I'm proud because I made it to the final in a type of martial arts event not many people succeed in. But most of all, I'm proud because I'm a writer who doesn't write about the martial arts from a safe distance. I'm a writer who is part of the reality of NHB fighting, and that feels like an accomplishment.

THE CONCEPT OF JEET KUNE DO

February 2002

What is *jeet kune do*? It has become one of the most well-worn questions in the martial arts. In the decades since Bruce Lee's death, an endless series of books, magazine articles and Web sites has taken up the question, but no one seems to be able to agree on the answer. This column is about why we can't agree on what *jeet kune do* is.

Some people believe that what Lee did—the sum total of techniques

he actually studied and performed—is jeet kune do. This is usually called “original JKD.” Others believe that Lee’s understanding of fight strategy and his way of appropriating different techniques from different arts is jeet kune do. This is usually called “JKD concepts.” Some people, like me, believe the difference between the two is what students of logic call a “false dichotomy.”

A false dichotomy is a kind of false black-and-white choice. For example, I could say, “Personality is determined by your environment or your genetics.” But the truth is that “or” doesn’t belong in this statement. Both genetics and environment help shape who you are. Likewise, there is no real split in jeet kune do. You can’t really say, “Jeet kune do is either original JKD (what Bruce Lee actually did) or JKD concepts (his ideas about fighting).” Whatever jeet kune do is, it is original JKD *and* JKD concepts. People who see a split between the two are often misusing the word “concept.”

A concept is a general idea inferred from specific instances or occurrences. A good example of a jeet kune do concept is fighting range. There are four ranges: kicking, punching, trapping and grappling. Kicking range, for instance, is where you are close enough to kick someone but too far away to punch. Maybe not every kick from every martial art fits cleanly into this range, but it is generally true that when we throw a kick, we are too far away to punch, trap or grapple.

The thing that is easy to forget is that all the words used in talking about fighting range are concepts. Fighting, range, kick, punch, trap and grapple—even the words “there,” “are” and “four”—are individual concepts. They stand for a collection of specific, concrete actions or things we learn to sum up with a single word. The writer Ayn Rand said it best: “Every word we use (with the exception of proper names) is a symbol that denotes a concept.”

So the original-JKD people use concepts just as much as the JKD-concepts people do. In fact, every human being that can use and understand language thinks conceptually. The whole point of Lee’s art was devotion to conceptual thinking. If you get too caught up in the details, you miss the big picture. Thinking like Lee can lead some people to the actual techniques he did, and it can lead some people to other arts.

What the difficulty boils down to is a distinction between proper names and concepts. What is jeet kune do? If you think that it’s a proper name denoting something that there is only one of (like Joe Smith, the Sears Tower or *Catcher in the Rye*), then jeet kune do is the name of the posthumously collected works of Lee. If you think it is only a concept, then

it is a word that denotes a collection of smaller concepts garnered from his particular experiences, such as the five ways of attack and the fighting ranges. But because they are concepts, they need not be tied to those particular experiences—or even to Lee, himself. That’s what makes people who think of jeet kune do as a proper name dismiss JKD concepts: If it’s purely conceptual, it can be about anyone or any martial art, so why use the name of Lee’s art?

Like I stated above, I think this split is a false one. Both original JKD and JKD concepts are conceptual. Both Lee’s actual original skills and the concepts that JKD people use to appropriate techniques from other arts are jeet kune do. In fact, at this point in its development, jeet kune do may be both a proper name and some kind of martial arts uber-concept. But whatever it is, dividing it into separate camps doesn’t get you any closer to the answer.

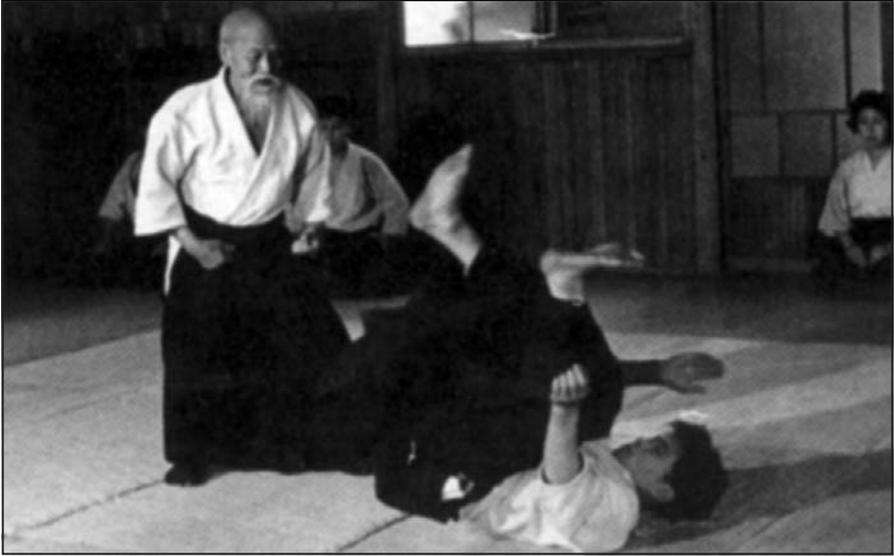
DEBTS TO THE PAST

March 2002

In the martial arts there is the strong sense that we owe a debt to the past. Sometimes it’s as simple as being loyal to our instructor: Because he put a lot of time and effort into teaching us, we consider his feelings before visiting other schools or studying other styles. Sometimes it extends to the long line of masters who came before us. Then practicing a martial art becomes a duty; we show our respect for their toil and sacrifices by carrying on their line. But maybe the best reason for feeling a debt to the past is because we owe a debt to enduring genius.

This debt is so obvious it’s often taken for granted. Every style is based on someone’s experience of fighting at some time in the past. For every technique we learn, experiment with, accept, improve or reject, we owe someone. Fighting arts don’t just pop into existence by themselves. They exist only because a person of special genius mastered the skills and put them together into a coherent whole worthy of being called an art. Without his efforts, there would be nothing called “martial arts,” and we would all be starting from zero.

How can we repay this debt? At what point can we say an art is our own and not a pale imitation of what came before us? At what point are we free of the genius of the past? A traditional martial artist might argue that we never are. As long as we practice an art brought to perfection under



All martial arts are the result of the genius of the masters who founded them. If not for the creative efforts of Morihei Uyeshiba (left), modern students would not be able to enjoy the benefits of practicing *aikido*.

social and cultural conditions that no longer exist, we can never escape the genius of that era. In that case, practicing a traditional art is a bit like being a scholar of Homer, Virgil or Dante: We confront greatness but never a contemporary one. There are no fresh challenges and no future changes. Our life becomes a testament to the fact that we will never be as great as the people we study.

Some may feel comfortable with this, but I think they are the minority. Most of the martial artists I know want to become the sage warriors they admire. They want to succeed their heroes, not succumb to them. They want to free whatever martial truth there is from the bonds of a distant time and place. But the dignity of tradition is still dignity, and the genius of the past is still genius. Relying on them is not foolish. It just makes us less our own person, a little less alive.

The only way to escape our debt to the past and truly succeed the martial arts masters who came before us is to master the past. We must know as much as the founder of our art knew and become as skilled as he was. We must see as deeply into the moral and perceptual paradoxes of fighting as he did. Only when we are equal to the greatness of the past can we surpass it.

This may seem impossible, and it almost is. Many fail and become travesties, purveyors of a mishmash of techniques and philosophies. They have neither the strength of borrowed genius that a faithful traditionalist has nor the easy power of new genius. But the rare few who do succeed really characterize our time. They are what Shakespeare would have called “the choice and master spirits of our age.”

So where do we begin mastering the past and making it our own? We start the moment we realize our martial art cannot live without us. We start when the borrowed movements we practice in class become as much ours as our own body is. No matter how poorly we perform at the beginning, no matter how awkward our version of someone else’s greatness is, it is still ours. We slowly pay our debt by meeting the challenge of that greatness.

THE RISE OF NHB FIGHTING AS A SPORT

April 2002

Back when no-holds-barred tournaments first hit the United States, things seemed pretty cut and dried. You either knocked your opponent out or submitted him with a choke or joint lock. If a fight went the distance, it was declared a draw. The idea was that this was martial arts competition, not a fight sport like boxing. There was no “10-point must” system, and there were no judges’ decisions. There were only lopsided wins nobody could dispute or long, ugly, messy fights that ended in a draw.

There are *vale tudo* purists out there who miss those days. The fights might not have been pretty and often the fighters were not evenly matched, but there was an honesty about 1990s-era NHB fights that martial artists craved. They were testing the strength of individual arts, and no one knew what was going to happen. It had the atmosphere of an experiment; we were learning what really worked and how it worked, not merely being entertained.

It’s hard to say exactly when things changed, but why they changed is obvious. People don’t pay to watch experiments. It might be interesting to see what happens when you let two superior fighters from different styles go at it without time limits or referee intervention, but not many people are going to sit through a couple hours of that. It might be fascinating for die-hard *vale tudo* fans, but to most people, it’s just two guys hugging each other on the ground for a couple hours.

To keep people ordering the pay-per-view shows and buying the videos,

rules were expanded and time limits were imposed. Referees could stand fighters up when things got slow, and judges were on hand to decide who the winner was when a fight ended without a knockout or submission. NHB fighting became a sport.

To martial artists who loved early NHB as a truth test, this was a disappointment. What fascinated them was seeing what would happen if a sumo wrestler fought a *kenpo* man or a Brazilian *jiu-jitsu* guy fought a wrestler. Most fighters weren't all that interesting, but that was OK because martial artists who tuned in only wanted to know what the fighter's art could do.

So what did we learn after those first few shows came and went? After seeing light-heavyweight *kenpo* expert Keith Hackney knock down and then bludgeon a 616-pound sumo wrestler into submission with his arm, we "knew" a *kenpo* fighter could do that. It might not happen every time a *kenpo* black belt stepped into the ring, but anytime someone dismissed *kenpo* as a "slap art," we could point to that stunning victory as a counterargument. Supporters of *jiu-jitsu*, kickboxing, *sambo* and a half-dozen other arts could do the same. They could point to victories by Royce Gracie, Maurice Smith and Oleg Taktarov as examples of their art really working.

When NHB became more of a sport, that kind of thing didn't happen anymore. The veracity of a martial art wasn't important. Some arts fared well and others didn't. Fighters abandoned stylistic loyalties and cross-trained in everything that helped them win. Once everyone had more or less the same skills, many martial artists lost interest. It seemed that the questions raised by early NHB tournaments had been answered with great conditioning and a generic collection of striking and grappling skills. It truly seemed like there was nothing more to learn. All that was left was to watch great athletes push each other to their limits with skills developed specifically for NHB.

I admit to being one of those people fascinated by early NHB in the United States, and I do miss that rush of discovery I felt every time I watched a tournament. But I think it's too easy for martial artists to dismiss sport NHB. Sure, it's not the same as one-on-one street fighting, but it's as close as we can morally and legally get to it. Granted, a judges' decision is not as clear as a tapout or knockout, but can you really call a match a draw when one fighter just hangs on and survives until the final bell? Ultimately, modern NHB may not be the martial arts experiment that it started out as. But like it or not, it is the result of that experiment—and that is something we can't ignore.

THE ETHICS OF FIGHTING

May 2002

Ethics are the general principles that guide our behavior and help us make specific moral choices. In the martial arts, they are standards for deciding when it is right to fight and when it isn't. Most people would agree that the only time it's right to fight is in self-defense. But what about sport fighting? It doesn't save anyone's life and is usually considered the worst kind of entertainment, a spectacle of blood and cruelty. Because it's unnecessary, many people argue that it is unethical, but nothing could be further from the truth.

Combat sports like kickboxing and no-holds-barred fighting may not be kind, but that does not mean they're wrong. What separates them from other unnecessary violence in the world is the consent of the athletes. Unlike a bullfight, in which the animal doesn't have a choice about whether it will take on a guy with a sword, a man can make a choice to step into the ring and risk his health and possibly even his life. We may not think it is a wise choice and we may be revolted by it, but it is an adult's right to make these decisions for himself.

The truth is, it's unethical to stop healthy, consenting adults from getting into a ring or octagon and duking it out. We have rules and referees to make these events as safe as possible. We have medical standards people must meet to be able to fight. We have laws that govern the matches and licensing systems to satisfy the suspicious. But making laws that stop consenting adults from participating in boxing or NHB matches means abridging their personal freedoms and taking away their right to choose what is best for them, and that is wrong.

In spite of all this, sometimes it's hard to be a cheerleader for combat sports. NHB may have the logic of liberty on its side, but all fight fans have seen their share of lopsided bouts that look like muggings. The main difference is that these men agreed to fight in a ring. It is hard to remember this distinction when you see one man beating a weaker opponent into submission, but fighting for sport is fundamentally different from an assault because an assault does not involve consent.

A good example of this difference happened during a recent boxing match. For 10 rounds, Richard Grant totally controlled the action against No. 1 International Boxing Federation super-middleweight contender James Butler. Butler is a powerful puncher, so Grant used good footwork to land his shots and be elsewhere before his opponent could blast him. He

did this for the entire fight and won a unanimous decision. It was Butler's second loss to Grant, and he was clearly upset by it. After he was declared the winner, Grant walked across the ring to shake Butler's hand. Still fuming, Butler responded by hitting him as hard as he could in the jaw with a hook. Grant fell to the mat, writhing in pain and only semiconscious. Butler was arrested for second-degree assault.

That is a perfect example of the difference consent makes. Those men agreed to meet each other and fight under boxing rules for 10 rounds. That means 30 minutes total of fighting. But while Grant was ready and expecting his heavy hook, Butler couldn't land it. Still, if he had landed that hook and knocked Grant out, it would have been OK. That's the risk both men consented to take. But by hitting Grant after the fight was over, Butler committed assault. He crossed the line into unethical behavior by going from consensual boxing to a surprise attack.

Some people might argue that the desire to try to beat someone unconscious in a ring is itself unhealthy. That may be true, but until it can be proved that a pacifist way of life (or any particular lifestyle) is the best, everyone must decide what is best for him. That freedom to choose is the cornerstone of ethics—not just in the fighting arts but in life in general.

In the fighting arts, however, it takes on a special importance. It assuages the guilt thoughtful people have about participating in combat sports, and it reminds the hotheads in the martial arts what the basic moral standard of fighting is. Ethical fighting happens in the ring or in self-defense. Everything else is just an assault.

FINDING TRUTH

June 2002

Recently, I attended a *kyudo* event here in Tokyo. Like most Japanese archery exhibitions, it was fairly routine: There were rows of archers going through careful, ritualized movements of nocking arrows onto the strings of oversize bows. Then with impeccable skill, they sent the arrows into faraway targets. It's the kind of thing that sounds about as much fun as watching paint dry.

But witnessing *kyudo* or any other traditional martial art isn't about entertainment. It's more like going to church.

When you watch someone go through an archery *kata*, it's like watching a sacred story ritually enacted. It's like watching Arjuna or Rama in an

episode from the Hindu epics or any number of religious heroes perched on the edge of fate. There, in the moments leading up to the shot, in the release and flight of the arrow, is the question, Will he succeed? If the arrow flies true and hits the target, the word “true” takes on added meaning. Like the epic hero, the kyudo master hints at something true about reality in general by his skill in arms.

The truth in kyudo, like in many contemplative martial arts, is mystic. It involves the notion that there is a mysterious connection between the archer and his target and that something beyond him is doing the shooting. So if a master archer tells us that the distinct differences between the man, the arrow and the target are illusions, it's intriguing. If he further maintains that knowing this truth—namely that everything is really one thing and that surrendering your sense of self is the key to hitting the target—we want to see him do it. If he succeeds, it all falls into place like a parable. Everything from the beginning of his ritual arrow nocking to the shaft quivering in the center of the target demonstrates what he's saying.

A skeptic may question whether these masters are any more (or less) successful than Olympic archers or bowhunters. But that's not the point. One could easily argue that Buddhist selflessness or unconscious action is present in all talented bowmen whether they call it that or not. You can't prove the presence or absence of vaguely defined mental concepts like selflessness. The point is that performing a martial skill as a religious ritual makes us see a different side of the truth. Kyudo masters, like most martial arts masters, are not scientists. They are not out to discover new facts through rigorous testing and experimentation. They are philosophers and religious men showing meaning through the well-known facts of archery.



Traditional archery exhibitions offer the practitioner a chance to reacquaint himself with the mystical side of the martial arts.

This is the reason I attend events like the kyudo exhibition. I go to see men of great skill and devotion show me a sacred point of view. Watching the quiet ritual unfold is somehow deeply satisfying, like listening to a wise old cleric sum up what he's learned from years of religious study. I believe I know more and understand more by the end of the demonstration. I look at the same world with different eyes—eyes that see a continuous whole where I've been taught only piecemeal reality exists.

Maybe that is something we need in the contemporary martial arts. When so much of the current scene is about professional fighting, fitness, self-defense and making money, maybe we need to see the sacred viewpoint that arts like kyudo offer. Somewhere in those quiet moments of slow, deliberate skill, we might find the meaning we've lost.

THE AGE OF MASTERY

July 2002

In the November 1999 issue of *Black Belt*, I wrote a column called “The Arc of Life.” It was about how youth is a time for learning and physical challenge and how old age is for preserving and passing on hard-won knowledge and the wisdom that comes from experience. But the main focus of the essay was on middle age being the time of true martial arts mastery.

This wasn't an original idea. I borrowed it from *aikijutsu* master Toshihiro Obata's theory that middle age is the time when a man is old enough to totally understand his art but young enough to still perform it at a high level. In particular, he was describing the descent of *aiki* skills and who got the best training from the great *aiki* masters of the past. But this philosophy struck me as a general truth. Regardless of the style, middle age really seems to be the time when skill and wisdom coincide.

Still, when I wrote that column, I was thinking only of master teachers. I wasn't thinking of active fighters. Traditional martial artists (such as *aikijutsu* masters) and sport fighters (such as kickboxers) sometimes maintain their skills at a high level in middle age. Men like these challenge their students to improve with a daily display of excellence. But most men older than 35 don't fight outside the practice hall, which makes the current fight scene even more surprising because some of today's best active fighters are middle-aged.

The obvious example of fighting past your prime is George Foreman. In 1994, at age 45, he defeated then 26-year-old Michael Moorer to become the

heavyweight boxing champion of the world for the second time. But what die-hard fans of boxing know is that the top of the heavyweight division is still home to aging talent: The current champion is Lennox Lewis, age 36; and top contenders like Mike Tyson, Michael Moorer and Oliver McCall are all in their mid-30s. Even 39-year-old Evander Holyfield is still in the top 10, trying to win the heavyweight title an unprecedented fifth time.

And boxers aren't the only fighters vying for victory in middle age. Kickboxers and no-holds-barred fighters continue to shine past what most consider their prime. At 36, heavyweight kickboxing champ Maurice Smith became the Extreme Fighting and Ultimate Fighting Championship



PHOTO BY ROBERT W. YOUNG

Maurice Smith (left, shown at the 2001 K-1 USA Championship) offers living proof that some of the best fighters in the world are middle-aged.

heavyweight titleholder. Then, at age 40, he won the American K-1 tournament, and he continues to fight in that event. Likewise, 38-year-old Randy Couture continues his (generally) winning ways in the UFC heavyweight division and shows no sign of retiring. Other fighters like Mark Coleman, Dan Severn, Tom Erikson, Tim Catalfo, Nobuhiko Takada, Rickson Gracie, Marco Ruas, Don Frye and Ken Shamrock continue to fight in their late 30s and early 40s.

What does all this mean? It means that maybe Obata was right. Maybe the title “master” isn’t just honorary. When a martial artist reaches middle age, he can be both a master teacher and one of the best fighters in the world. He can understand his art (and its place in the world) and be the fighting ideal he preaches about.

Age and great skill don’t guarantee insight. But if you’re looking for someone who can deal with both the means and meaning of fighting, a middle-aged fighter is probably your best bet. He has a lot more to offer than the 25-year-old self-proclaimed “grandmasters” of the world, and he commands the respect that we normally grant to frail, octogenarian legends.

Traditional martial artists may not be interested in testing their arts in competition, but they can take heart in the notion that the best sport fighters are showing them a vital truth about martial arts mastery. They are making a good case for middle age being the peak of any martial artist’s career. Youth may be the peak of strength and speed and old age may be the time of deepest insight, but it is only in middle age that we have the best of both worlds.

DON’T TAKE ANYTHING AT FACE VALUE

August 2002

One of the good things about being a journalist is that you get to be skeptical about everything. When you interview a great master or fighter, you get to ask him the hard questions, the ones about his ability or his worth. Of course, people who write for martial arts magazines can pen their own tributes or sharp opinion pieces, too—I’ve certainly written my fair share of both—but it’s more fun to play devil’s advocate for your paycheck.

The easiest thing to be skeptical about in the martial arts is *chi*. Anyone who claims to have superhuman powers is just asking for it. If a person says he can issue some strange energy from his palms, he invites all kinds

of mocking questions and demands for proof. Then when the chi master declines to demonstrate this ability in tests that could prove or disprove his claims by saying, “It’s too dangerous to use,” or “It’s a secret technique,” he deserves to be asked why anyone should believe in an ability he won’t (and likely cannot) show.

Even though this kind of skepticism can be fun, it can also get mean-spirited in a hurry. It can turn from sarcastic but legitimate questioning about someone’s chi demonstrations to passing judgment on his metaphysics. Asking a chi master whether he can lift up a woman’s skirt from a distance *is* flippant, but it conceals a genuine point: If he can’t move a little cloth with an invisible force, he sure can’t repel a mugger with it. But using a confrontation like this to rate Chinese beliefs lower than Western beliefs (like the belief that only scientific claims are meaningful) has more to do with personal feelings than reason.

Being skeptical gets a little more hairy when you talk about self-defense. Martial artists often practice *kata* by themselves or self-defense routines with a partner. It’s all well-rehearsed, and there are a limited number of attacks and responses. The skeptic wants to ask about the attacks he *doesn’t* see in the routines. He wants to ask a *wing chun* or karate practitioner, “What do you do if someone tackles you?” or “How would you fight a boxer?”

When these questions are asked, martial artists sometimes have convincing answers and sometimes they don’t. If they don’t convince you, how do you satisfy your skepticism? Do you make an exercise of trying to tackle the wing chun guy? Do you risk offending him and maybe causing a real fight? Even then, could a scuffle with a reporter confirm or refute a martial artist’s claims?

It’s this kind of skepticism that inspired the Ultimate Fighting Championship: Can these guys really do everything they say they can? Can a top karate guy beat a wrestler? Can a *jiu-jitsu* guy beat a boxer? The solution was to invite them all into an octagonal cage and have at it. That would prove who could really fight and who couldn’t, right? It seemed like a dream come true for a martial arts skeptic.

Unfortunately, those hopes were quickly dashed. It’s easy to be skeptical about no-holds-barred fighting. I mean, guys were really stepping into the octagon and really winning fights, but many critics quickly pointed out that there were rules (no biting, no eye gouging, no groin strikes), there were time limits and it was always one-on-one. So the results weren’t conclusive. They offered strong support for the argument that wrestling, jiu-jitsu, shootfighting and kickboxing were the best answers to many self-defense

situations, but they didn't tell us anything about weapon arts or defense against multiple opponents. Moreover, the events didn't show other arts to be without different value. Even though no karate man ever made it to the finals of an NHB show, it doesn't mean karate will fail in self-defense. As one Philippine martial artist said to me, "Just because guns exist, does that mean knives aren't dangerous?"

Like I said, it's fun to be skeptical. It's fun to ask beatific chi masters, somber traditionalists or even fierce NHB athletes about the holes in their reasoning. It puts some much-needed humor in the martial arts, and sometimes we even learn things because of it. But it has one big drawback: It's too easy to be skeptical of others and ignore our own shortcomings and implicit value judgments. In short, we shouldn't take anything at face value—especially our own skepticism.

TUNNEL VISION

October 2002

One thing that always strikes me about the martial arts is how easy it is to get tunnel vision. People who practice traditional Asian styles have little interest in contemporary self-defense or sport fighting. They think a great deal about everything from kung fu to *kyudo*, and they can be very insightful about arts that interest them. But their thoughts on other facets of the martial arts are often shallow.

Fighting athletes and hard-nosed self-defense types are the same. They offer complex and ingenious solutions to dangerous situations. They also have an encyclopedic knowledge of actual cases in which a technique did or didn't work. But they seem baffled by the fact that people still practice traditional Asian systems. If they've proved how effective their techniques are, they ask, why doesn't everyone throw away their karate pajamas and fight like they do?

Answers to questions like this come from trying to understand a different point of view. People who have a deep but narrow interest in the martial arts speak to each other only about contrasts with other kinds of fighting. They carry on dialogues in the *dojo* as well as in specialty magazines and Internet forums devoted to their styles. While they learn more about their own arts, they reinforce their low opinions of other systems. In the end, all they've done is given their disdain a reasonable appearance without ever understanding the other perspective.

My personal bugaboo has always been mixed-martial arts enthusiasts and self-defense experts not understanding the traditionalist's point of view. For them, self-defense and sport fighting are the most immediate and vital areas of the arts. Fighting is a how-to problem to be solved: What is the most efficient way to handle an opponent in the octagon? How do you hurt him while not getting hurt yourself? How do you handle a mugger verbally so things don't get physical? How do you handle it when it does get physical? But when you focus too much on these issues, it's easy to neglect the big picture. And that is what the traditional martial arts viewpoint is all about.

It's a point I've been harping on as long as I've written for martial arts magazines. Traditional arts have a lot of answers about *why* you learn to fight and *when* it is right and wrong to fight. They offer great insight into the psychology of violence and show us the relationship between fighting and the rest of our lives. The traditional arts may not be very helpful in the ring or on the street, but their enduring truths sustain them even when their techniques are no longer practical. Without the traditional point of view, self-defense and sport-fighting experts become morally neutral, and that's dangerous. Pure problem solvers who do not have a strong moral compass become like rocket scientist Werner Von Braun, who once quipped, "After the rockets go up, where they come down is not my concern."

On the other hand, it's too easy to take the moral high ground and forget the practical point of view. Instead of running the risk of action without understanding, traditional martial artists risk understanding a great deal and not being able to do anything about it. A martial art can become irrelevant when it isn't martial anymore. There are people who need real fighting skills and they need them now. If they can't get them from the traditional arts, they will bypass those styles and the wisdom they contain. Not seeing things from a practical point of view ensures that this wisdom will eventually be lost.

The main point of this is that it's all too easy to get tunnel vision, and it has serious negative consequences. Thinking of the martial arts as problem solving or as an applied fighting skill may get you somewhere—but it could get you to a bad place without a dose of philosophy. Likewise, it's easy to be philosophical about fighting and ignore the messy, cruel world of self-defense and sport. But all that does is ensure that both applied skill and deep, age-old thought about that skill remain separate. Tunnel vision accomplishes only one thing: It makes us ignorant of valuable facets of the martial arts. It is only by widening our vision and trying to truly understand fighting arts we don't understand that we make them and ourselves better.

STAR WARS GEEKS

November 2002

While watching the news the other day, I saw a report about the premiere of the new *Star Wars* movie. It showed a line of 30-something people, mostly men, who'd been waiting outside the theater for days to see *Episode II: Attack of the Clones*. They were all dressed in elaborate Jedi costumes, waving plastic light sabers and way too full of dorky enthusiasm.

As I watched those middle-age nerds play at being superheroes, I grew more and more uncomfortable. It looked embarrassingly familiar, like a scene from some *dojo*.

Some martial arts training halls cater to a kind of kung fu theater fantasy. They look like a cross between a Buddhist temple and a Chinese restaurant. Practitioners train in semitraditional uniforms that are usually made of satin or augmented with fierce-looking animal patches. They practice a lot of forms and self-defense routines and everyone works hard, yet the action looks like it is being performed by actors who are preparing for the stage instead of people who are preparing for combat.

Things really start to look like *Star Wars* when people get into *chi* power. It usually amounts to doing a punch, trap or push-hands technique while trying to project an invisible "force" from the bottom of their belly. But watching a class full of people doing this doesn't inspire mystical awe like Yoda did when he helped Luke Skywalker navigate the dangers of Jedi training in *The Empire Strikes Back*. It looks like a bunch of well-costumed kung fu theater devotees indulging their fantasies. However, because they're sharing the same fantasy, everyone is nice enough not to interrupt a partner's *chi* technique with a kick to the face.

Some *dojo* are different. They try their best to recreate the original training halls of Asia. Their students wear uniforms appropriate to the time and nation of origin of the art. They strive for historical accuracy in technique and terminology. But are they really any different from Civil War hobbyists? Are they any different from the guys who spend their summer vacation stomping around Gettysburg, Pennsylvania and re-enacting that famous battle? For that matter, are they any different from the Society for Creative Anachronism people who recreate medieval battles at Renaissance fairs? Maybe not.

If martial arts practice strays from real fighting, then we *are* like the above-mentioned hobbyists. If there is no danger in practice, no struggle with unyielding opponents, no glimpses of mortality, then it's hardly martial

arts; it's a bunch of men and women enacting a martial arts drama and enjoying their simulated reality. It is no different from the members of the Society for Creative Anachronism or *Star Wars* geeks. It is going through the motions because we like the idea of fighting but not fighting itself.

Some people might find this offensive. After all, the martial arts are about more than just fighting, right? Right. But fighting is the root of everything else the martial arts are about. If we ignore that, we lose the arts' meaning and vitality. At best, we turn ourselves into faithful hobbyists like those Civil War re-enactors. At worst, we become costumed buffoons like those rabid *Star Wars* fans, aping an epic story instead of creating one for real with our lives. Either way, once we distance ourselves from fighting, we stop being martial artists.

THE REALITY OF SELF-DEFENSE

December 2002

Self-defense instruction has developed into a martial art in which people who offer a collection of easy-to-learn techniques and principles also teach a different way of looking at the world. They claim their systems are all about “real-world,” “street” or “combat” techniques. The assumption is that there is a sharp distinction between “real self-defense” and what is taught in martial arts schools. But in many ways, what they teach and the ways they justify themselves are very similar to what traditional stylists do.

The first similarity is that lineage is important in both the modern systems and the classical arts. All fighting styles are based on someone's experience in combat. In the Japanese weapons arts, it's often the experience of an aristocratic warrior from the 18th or 19th century. Modern self-defense is usually based on someone's military or law-enforcement experience—such as 20th-century legends William E. Fairbairn and Rex Applegate. But the traditional Asian arts and modern self-defense systems rely on the experience of someone who found a way to survive while others perished.

The second similarity is in technique. Many times, defenses against knife and gun attacks in self-defense arts look a lot like what you'd see in the average *dojo*. They may not be exactly the same as what your local karate school instructor teaches, but they are not drastically different, either. After all, there are only so many ways to kick a knee or chop a throat with the edge of your hand.

This all sounds very convincing, but there's a worm somewhere in the

wood. Are the self-defense arts more “real” than the traditional martial arts? Advocates of the modern systems can recite lists of cases in which what they taught saved someone’s life, but so can advocates of sport fighting and the traditional arts. Also, have the self-defense gurus really left metaphysics behind? If there are so many effective ways to defend yourself, how can self-defense promoters talk about “reality” like it is a single thing they have a monopoly on?

The fact is, “reality” is one of those words that everyone uses and pretends to understand. Are the scenarios that self-defense people use in training real? No. All martial arts training is only an approximation of reality. Are those scenarios closer to reality than what you’d do in a karate school? Maybe. But which ones? There are many different self-defense arts, and their methods don’t always agree. If they all get results, does that mean they all address different realities? The easy way out is to say they all address different parts of the same reality. If that’s the case, then why banish the traditional martial arts to fantasy land? A karate practitioner can punt a mugger in the groin and run. A self-defense expert can launch a pre-emptive barrage of punches, knees and elbows. Aren’t they both addressing different parts of the same reality?

The implicit worldview of the self-defense expert is that simplicity and survival are all that the martial arts are about. It’s a valuable point of view and one worth exploring, but it’s not the only point of view and certainly not the only one that addresses reality (whatever that means). Karate and other classical Asian arts have their successes in the world outside the training hall. Likewise, the techniques and the importance of lineage in the traditional arts and the contemporary ones are not that different. In the end, it may turn out that the main difference between self-defense and the traditional Asian arts is just a philosophical one.

MARTIAL ARTISTS ON TV

January 2003

Celebrity endorsement in Japan is almost the same as anywhere else in the world: A famous person displays a product, smiles a lot and tells you how great it is.

In Japan, however, martial artists and pro fighters often become celebrities. You won’t see great fighters get their own TV shows like Chuck Norris’ *Walker, Texas Ranger*, but you will catch them on television almost daily in

variety shows and commercials. For example, pro-wrestler Nobuhiko Takada used to push VAAM Hornet Juice, a sports drink, and submission wrestlers Kazushi Sakuraba and Kaoru Uno were spokesmen for motorbikes. Former sumo wrestler and current mixed-martial arts fighter Tadao Yasuda is the poster boy for the Big and Tall men's clothing chain. K-1 champ Peter Aerts sells energy drinks, and Antonio Inoki promotes pizza.

The odd thing is the way they pop up when you least expect it. I recently watched a show called *Sasuke*, a kind of open-challenge obstacle course. Contestants must leap across pools of water, climb nets and ropes, and run across platforms that spin sideways and dump you in the drink if you step on them the wrong way. The list of challengers included models, cooks, comedians, transvestites, Bruce Lee impersonators, Olympic athletes and middle-age schoolteachers. Even Pancrase and Abu Dhabi Combat Club submission-wrestling champ Sanae Kikuta gave it a shot. He didn't make it past the second stage, however. Unable to hang onto a log rolling down two steel rails, he was flung into the water below. (Incidentally, both the Lee wannabe and the transvestite made it farther than the embarrassed Kikuta.)

The following day, there was a show that re-enacted Japanese celebrities' brushes with death. The last segment was on sumo-wrestling superstar Konishiki. Apparently, he took a lot of painkillers during his career and was unaware that he had developed severe ulcers. The condition worsened until he had three holes in his stomach and was bleeding internally. The gruesome part was watching an actor play out a scene in which the sumo wrestler is on his hands and knees struggling to reach a bathroom to relieve the awful pain in his gut. Then he was shown looking in the toilet with alarm while he expelled nearly half his blood. (Konishiki did make it to a hospital in time, however, and after recovering from his ordeal, he fought in one more tournament before retiring.)

Immediately after that program, I watched a live comedy special. It was a challenge in which a comedian named Hitoshi Matsumoto was not allowed to scream in fear or surprise for two hours. If he could manage that, he would win \$50,000. However, \$5,000 would be deducted from the purse every time he said, "Aaah!" The hosts then sent him on a David Letterman-type errand in which he had to pedal a bicycle to the local convenience store to get a cup of coffee. In what is probably the most terrifying thing most of us could imagine, super-heavyweight no-holds-barred fighter Bob Sapp appeared out of nowhere and chased Matsumoto down the street. Of course, the frightened comedian wailed, "Aaaaah!" at the top of his lungs, pedaling for his life. After a giant ball rolled after him à la *Raiders of the*

Lost Ark, an expert archer on horseback wearing full samurai regalia galloped alongside and launched arrows at the poor comedian. He shrieked again and continued pedaling furiously. By the end of the show, he owed the hosts a couple grand.

Following that, I watched *Toneruzu-no-Okage Deshita*, a cooking/game show in which a celebrity is presented with three gourmet dishes. One is made out of something he finds repulsive, and the show consists of the contestant pretending to like everything while the hosts interrogate him to figure out which food he doesn't like. The celebrity was Olympic judo gold-medalist and controversial MMA fighter Hidehiko Yoshida. Apparently disgusted by lamb, he happily munched away on it and the other dishes and never revealed how revolted he was. In the end, the hosts were stumped and Yoshida won.

Again, the oddity of martial arts fame in Japan is the fact that it's common. With the exception of movie stars like Chuck Norris and Steven Seagal, there really are no mainstream martial arts celebrities in the United States. Sure, there is the occasional Frank Shamrock Burger King commercial, and Sammo Hung had a TV series for a while. But in Japan, you see fighters and martial artists on television every day. For some, that might seem boring. But for those of us who train, it's a breath of fresh air to have our arts in the mainstream instead of on the sidelines.

MARTIAL ART OR MARTIAL SCIENCE?

February 2003

The martial arts are called arts for a good reason. Just about anything martial we do falls under some definition of the word "art." The martial arts used in movies are a type of fine art. They are simulated reality, much like dance. Pure fighting arts, like those used in sport fighting and self-defense, are arts in the sense that they are applied skills. In the same way that there is an art of navigation and an art of engraving, there is an art of fighting. Even my own idiosyncratic definition, which says that martial skill is necessarily shaped by moral choices (or the lack of them), is still art in the sense of its being an applied skill.

So it seems that whoever coined the term "martial arts" got it right. But there are some people who disagree. Some people want their fighting skill to be a science.

There are instructors who call what they do "martial science," "scien-

tific street fighting” or the “science of self-defense.” Their reasons for doing this aren’t always clear. Sometimes they want to distinguish the truth of their fighting principles from the aesthetics of theatrical martial arts. Sometimes they want to give the impression that they’ve discovered universal laws and principles that govern fighting. Perhaps they think their ideas carry the same weight as Newton’s laws of motion or the laws of thermodynamics. But the truth is that no matter what we call it, fighting will never be a science in the way that physics, chemistry and biology are because it requires intuition.

In the training hall, something *like* science happens. We try things out and learn what works and what doesn’t. We think about the principles of our system and digest them. But it’s nothing as conclusive as a true scientific experiment.

Fighting isn’t about producing objective knowledge; it is simply about an individual learning to use what he knows without the aid of reason. When we step into the ring or confront a mugger, knowledge is in the background. Our actions come from pure instinct. We know what to do, and we do it without anything in between.

Science can help us be better martial artists. Kinematics can help us improve our performance. Nutrition can teach us what we need to know to stay healthy, and exercise science can help us train better and safer. But no amount of science is going to tell us what to do in a fight with the



PHOTO BY ROBERT W. YOUNG

The techniques and strategies used in the ring form an art because they are a body of applied skills.

same amount of confidence that it can tell us about vitamin deficiencies and training regimens.

Trying to make fighting a science instead of an art is tempting. Ideally, science is the pinnacle of human understanding. It is the cool and precise arbiter of truth. We know, quite apart from any human factors, that the constant of gravity is real. We can all perform Galileo's simple experiment with confidence that things of different weight fall at the same rate. We'd like the martial arts to be that absolute, but combat does not follow simple, precise rules. At best, we can only have a vague notion of how another man will fight us. Trying to shape that into a science is a waste of time.

No, there will never be a science of fighting. The way to achieve the goals of fighting is to remember that it is an art. Science can help us understand and improve our arts. Philosophy can guide us through the hard moral decisions that fighting confronts us with. Religion can help us understand our innermost selves. But art is the summing up of all these things in the fighting skill of an individual.

THE COMPETITIVE EDGE

March 2003

Once upon a time, it seemed like only technique mattered. If you had mastered the skills of karate or kung fu, you didn't have to be in especially good shape to use them. In fact, people who really had faith in effortless victory could be incredibly condescending toward athletes. Strength and aerobic training were considered primitive and brutish, things only a simpleton would get involved in. "Real" martial artists knew that intuition and dexterity took care of everything in a fight.

These days, everyone who isn't irretrievably flaky gives sports science its due. Whether you're doing *aikijutsu* or Brazilian *jiu-jitsu*, being strong and having more stamina help you do it better.

Why did we resist that idea for so long? Why did it take years for the martial arts to catch up with other sports and physical pursuits? I think it's because we see our arts as mental disciplines, while we see athleticism as cognitive or spiritual failure. We see athletes as people who can't grasp anything besides conditioning and basic technique.

There is some truth to this belief. A superior athlete with only a little martial arts training will easily beat most people, and he doesn't have to delve too deeply into the arts to do it. But this doesn't mean that athletes

are too stupid to understand the fighting arts and philosophy. In fact, a lot of athletes are smarter than most of us will ever be. For example, astrophysicist David Schramm, one of the architects of Big Bang cosmology, was a champion Greco-Roman wrestler. He was so good, in fact, that he was a finalist in the 1968 Olympic trials.

So athletes can be positively brilliant sometimes. What really irks martial artists is that you don't *have* to be all that bright or insightful to be a good athlete. You don't have to be smarter than an ape to be as quick or as strong as one. For every Dave Schramm out there, there are a hundred meatheads who can beat you to a pulp because of their superior strength and conditioning. It's an ugly truth that seems to debunk our beautiful martial arts ideals.

Of course, it's not that simple at all. Once an athlete is matched with a skilled martial artist of the same size and fitness level, the only difference between the two is mental: One knows how to fight and one doesn't. One knows how to keep his head and function from a calm center, and one doesn't. I'm sure some readers have seen football players and weightlifters get totally schooled by *kyokushin* karate or Brazilian jiu-jitsu guys who were in good shape. When martial artists reach a high level of physical fitness, you can really see the difference the mental aspects of the arts make.

Still, athleticism is so ugly to many martial artists that they want to minimize its importance. They argue that increased strength or stamina is incidental, that being in shape doesn't hurt your technique but it doesn't help it, either. There is some truth to this belief, as well. No amount of strength or cardio training will help you use or endure eye pokes, groin kicks and other techniques. But if you can't walk up a flight of stairs without getting winded, chances are slim that you could even position your body to perform a decent self-defense technique.

Likewise, some people argue that being aware of your surroundings, knowing how dangerous people behave and avoiding fights are the real goals of the martial arts. But even then, you need to have at least a decent level of fitness. How can you run away from a bad situation if you can't run a few laps without passing out? What happens when you do have to struggle with someone? You still need at least a moderate level of strength and conditioning to survive.

What about the martial arts ideal of effortless victory? It's something of an illusion. Technique is important. So are intuition and dexterity. They are all part of what makes a victory seem effortless. Depending on your level of fitness, it may even feel effortless to you. But a lot of mental and

physical training goes into making it seem that way. In short, effortless victory is about being in good enough shape to allow your body to do what you know how to do.

TAKADA'S LAST DANCE

April 2003

On November 24, 2002, no-holds-barred fighting said goodbye to Nobuhiko Takada. After 20 years of pro-wrestling bouts and real fights, the Japanese icon called it quits. For most American fight fans and martial artists, it was a nonevent. But to many in Japan, it was the end of an era.

Takada has been called the “Hulk Hogan of Japan.” During his prime, he was a major celebrity, but he came to the attention of the martial arts world only with his two matches against Rickson Gracie. When he lost both fights, American fans dismissed him as an actor who thought he could fight, and he was written off as a foil for Gracie’s considerable *jiu-jitsu* skill—not a serious threat.

Japanese fans saw him differently. He was more than a sports entertainer to them. He was a one-man revival of old-school pro wrestling, where matches were often real. He trained with catch-as-catch-can legends like Karl Gotch and Lou Thesz, and was seen as part of that tradition. His fans in Japan considered him a real grappler with a real lineage who was also an exciting entertainer.

As his career progressed, Takada’s matches became more and more like NHB fights. In one, he knocked out former sumo wrestler Koji Kitao, and in another, he beat up heavyweight boxer Trevor Berbick with leg kicks. By the time he signed on for his first bout with Gracie, he was a sports hero in Japan, and many people thought he would beat the Brazilian. But Gracie quickly submitted Takada with an armbar. In their second meeting, the Japanese legend gave Gracie more of a fight, but he got armbarred again, at which point the rest of the world tuned out. Consequently, any time he won a fight after that, people assumed the victory was a work. Any time he lost, people considered it further proof that he didn’t belong in the ring. He suffered the curse of all show wrestlers: No one quite believes them when they fight for real.

Popular opinion in Japan was markedly different. Takada was still a hero to his countrymen. There was no shame in losing to a man largely regarded as the greatest *jiu-jitsu* fighter alive. What’s more, Takada continued

fighting and took on the top heavyweights that are conspicuously absent from Gracie's fight record, including Mark Coleman, Mark Kerr and Igor Vovchanchyn. Sure, Japanese fans were disappointed when he lost, but they still loved and respected him because he took up the challenge instead of protecting his reputation. He was showing the courage and daring they expected from a hero.

Takada's legacy is about more than just his record, though. He served as a father figure and mentor to a generation of Japanese competitors. The best-known is Takada Dojo's star fighter Kazushi Sakuraba. He was a young boy in Takada's entourage in the early 1990s, working his corner in big matches as well as appearing on the undercard. After a sumolike apprenticeship, Sakuraba started fighting in NHB tournaments with Takada and went on to become the greatest middleweight Japan has ever produced.

Takada has inspired and supported the careers of many other fighters, too. He gave more than a few Japanese stars their start or helped them gain nationwide fame. He's also the one who was brave enough to lead the way from pro wrestling to NHB competition, showing other fighters they could hang with the best. It's small wonder, then, that Kiyoshi Tamura broke down and cried after he beat Takada in his retirement match. Tamura was a young pro wrestler when Takada was in his prime, and when he knocked out the 40-year-old legend, it was like he had beaten up his idol. Spectators had never seen someone so upset about winning.

In short, Takada matters to the Japanese because he was a hero worth looking up to. He was brave enough to test his ideals in the ring, and he was a good man outside the ring. Even in retirement, he will continue to matter while he helps the current crop of Japanese fighters rise to the level of their foreign counterparts.

THE MEANING OF THE MARTIAL ARTS

May 2003

“**W**hat's all this getting you?” my friend asked, wondering why I spend so much time practicing and writing about the martial arts when I could be doing something else.

It's never an easy question, but it's one that should be asked about anything that becomes the center of your life. There are a lot of different answers, most of which are so common they might as well be issued as a pamphlet with your first *gi*. The easy responses are about intangibles such

as self-confidence and inner peace. The more measurable ones involve staying healthy and learning how to defend yourself and your family.

My friend quickly waved them off: “You can gain self-confidence by doing anything well, and you can find inner peace in church. If you want to stay fit, lift weights and jog. If you want to defend yourself, buy a gun. All those things take less time and effort than the martial arts.”

I tried to answer him with stock replies. Yes, using a gun is efficient, but many self-defense situations don’t require lethal force. Yes, you can get fit in other ways, and there are plenty of methods for increasing self-confidence or enriching your spiritual life, but only in the martial arts do you find all those components in one activity. I also mentioned other benefits like learning about history and foreign cultures.

After my spiel, there was silence. My clear, practical, well-rehearsed answers felt empty and were utterly disappointing. But I didn’t know what else to say, and he didn’t argue anymore. Reasonable questions with mundane answers often have that effect.

For days afterward, my mind returned to that conversation. It seemed like my friend was trying to find a reason to practice. He was hoping for something more than practical answers. He was looking for meaning, for the will to do something—anything—with his time. But nothing seemed worth doing. What can you say to that?

The truth is, you can’t say much. I recited practical reasons for doing the martial arts, but if pragmatism isn’t a reason to get out of bed in the morning and carry on with your life, it won’t motivate you to go to the *dojo* every night. He wanted something that would go straight to the core of his existence. He wanted to feel the way many of us do about the martial arts.

Perhaps I should have told him about meditative war arts like *kyudo*, where archers confront the philosophical problems of identity, perception and action every time they face a target. I could have drawn him into a conversation about the moral dilemmas that come with practicing the self-defense arts. I could have told him how winning a kickboxing or mixed-martial arts match is like a victory over death, a taste of immortality. But that would only tempt him to train for a while.

Feeling a deep sense of meaning or purpose in anything is a kind of conversion experience. It is like a person who prays every day for years and suddenly feels “saved,” or someone who solves practical problems his whole life but becomes convinced that “reason” is the center of human existence.

I had my own conversion experience during my early teens in judo class. It was the first time I broke someone’s arm. Until then, martial arts were

academic and artistic. They were something outside myself, like watching a movie or thinking about a strategy. But as I locked out that guy's arm, he didn't follow the story line. I slowly and deliberately kept bending his limb the wrong way, and he kept struggling. When his elbow popped, it was a bit of a shock. For the first time, the moral problems of the martial arts were real and personal. I was learning a negative skill that involved hurting people with my bare hands.

That experience forced me to think about what I was doing. It convinced me that really learning how to fight makes you come to terms with the consequences of combat. The martial arts make you consider when you should and shouldn't fight. They force you to think about when you must fight for survival and about the value of peace. But most of all, they make you think about life and death, the very nature of being.

When I picture my friend in a martial arts class, I don't imagine he'd derive that benefit from training. I doubt he'd see it as much more than a workout. But the kind of meaning we're all looking for doesn't come from a single experience or a sermon like this one. It comes from being involved in something that holds promise for us. It comes from doing something until it moves us on a fundamental level. What are we getting out of the martial arts? The only way others will really know is to put in the time and effort; then maybe they'll find what we have.

ESSENTIAL ADVICE FOR LIVING AND TRAINING IN ASIA

June 2003

Many martial artists long to study where their style originated. Too often, however, it seems like an impossible dream. Sure, they could spend two weeks vacationing in Taiwan or Thailand. They might meet a famous master, take some pictures and do a little training. But getting more than a taste will require them to take up residence—and that's what seems impossible.

It's a fact that every year, thousands of Westerners come to Asia to live, work and study. Depending on your background, education and skills, you could find it relatively easy or extremely hard to do the same thing—but not impossible. I know because I've lived in Japan for more than three years. The following are some tips for those of you who want to give it a try:

- Get a bachelor's degree. It's almost a requirement for obtaining a job that is worth having in the long term. Some people do live and work in

Asia without a degree—they may be students, soldiers based in Korea or Japan, or lucky backpackers who stumble across a job that fits their experience—but their stays are usually short term. If you really want to devote yourself to an art, you need the stable lifestyle that a degree provides.

- Research the country in which you want to live. Just loving a country's martial arts is not enough because most of your time will be spent outside the *dojo*. You have to know all the good things the culture has to offer so you can decide whether it's worth uprooting your life for. You must also know all the bad things so you can judge whether or not you can tolerate them.

For instance, some people love the classical Japanese martial arts. They often know some Japanese and are thoroughly versed in the special culture and etiquette of those arts, so they assume they'll like Japan. But many become disillusioned by what happens outside the training hall. The clear hierarchy they love in the *dojo* becomes the insufferable office fiefdom of petty managers in everyday life. Likewise, their admiration for Japanese cultural pride turns to disgust when it manifests itself as racism. I lost count of how many landlords refused to rent an apartment to me because I am a foreigner and of how many who said they would only if I was the "right" color.

- Learn the language. In some countries where foreign-language skills are high, many people will speak to you in English. Because much of the world uses the Roman alphabet, you won't have much trouble looking up terms in a dictionary, either. But in many Asian nations, you won't find more than a few people with even basic English skills. If you can't read the script—Chinese, Korean, Japanese and Thai all have different writing systems—doing simple things like finding a train station or paying a bill will be incredibly difficult. Knowing at least the basics of the country's language makes living and training there a challenge instead of an ordeal.

- Save some money. I'm always amazed at the number of people who arrive in Japan with little or no funds and spend most of their first year just trying to make ends meet. If you come for martial arts training and can't afford to pay for it, you're wasting your time. Do yourself a favor and save enough money so you can have a comfortable transition to working and training in your new home. That will be difficult enough even without financial problems.

No matter which art and which country you choose, there will be additional problems that crop up. And you will solve them. All it will take is a little patience, effort and sacrifice. But isn't that what being a martial artist is all about?

A TASTE OF REALITY

July 2003

There is always something a little unreal about the time we spend in the *dojo*. We fight within the safe but artificial guidelines of sporting rules. We rehearse self-defense scenarios that are realistic but still not reality itself. We even practice perfecting ideal forms of fighting without caring much about their function. In short, reality gets a particular slant any time you practice a martial art. But sometimes reality doesn't need a slant. Sometimes it's brutally obvious.

A few weeks ago, a guy broke his neck at Takada Dojo, the gym I go to in Tokyo. When I say "broke," I don't mean the kind of injury after which you wear a metal halo and keep the use of your limbs during your recovery. No way. I mean the guy was paralyzed from the neck down. They rushed him to the hospital and operated immediately. He was unable to move at all for a week afterward. Now he's able to twitch his fingers, but no one can say for sure how much of a recovery he'll make—if any.

Takada Dojo is mainly a wrestling and no-holds-barred gym. The guy who broke his neck (I'll call him Yamada) worked out there infrequently. He wasn't in great shape, but he wasn't a weakling, either. He was just an average guy who wrestled as a hobby, much like most people in any martial art.

Yamada hit the mats with another guy, an average person much like himself. He went for a double-leg takedown and got it. Then the other guy caught Yamada in a triangle choke (*sankaku-jime*) with his legs. As Yamada struggled to escape, he got caught in an *omo-plata* arm lock. Somewhere in the middle of this—and no one is exactly sure how—Yamada got his neck snapped and went limp. It all happened very quickly.

Right now, there is a picture of Yamada in his hospital bed tacked to the gym's bulletin board. It's supposed to be a reminder to fill out the "get well" cards that are also posted there. But the cards seem more like a grim reminder of the simple, brutal realities of martial arts practice. Yamada was a healthy, active man. Now he's a quadriplegic confined to a hospital bed because of something that happened at the gym. It doesn't get much simpler than that.

At times like this, it's hard to write an essay for *Way of the Warrior*. It's hard because, right now, martial arts philosophy seems thin and insubstantial by comparison. Writing about definitions of art, the morality of sport fighting or combat Zen seems so small compared to the existential fact of crippling

injury. No matter how we sculpt our view of the martial arts, brute chance can intrude at any time. Any one of us could end up like Yamada.

Maybe the best thing we can do is just accept the fact that this is part of the martial arts. Sometimes accidents happen and people get hurt—sometimes badly. Maybe all we can do is respect that enough to try to keep our practice sessions as safe as possible. But there is something about this that seems unsatisfying.

Maybe this sort of thing is the beginning of philosophy in the martial arts. The common tragedies of men like Yamada shouldn't simply be dismissed as accidents. Maybe tragedies like these are the reason fighting men decided to study virtue and the nature of being to begin with. Maybe the whole point of being a witness to a tragedy in the fighting arts is to put away the comfortable realities of whatever system we study. Then we can see a wider, clearer reality. And maybe what we lose in comfort, we'll gain in wisdom.



PHOTO BY ROBERT W. YOUNG

The element of danger that is present in full-contact training and competition may be the basis for the development of martial arts virtue and wisdom.

SETTING A STANDARD IN PRINT

August 2003

When I was a boy, I was addicted to biographies. They were great stories that were also true. I thought I was really learning about life from them. Autobiographies were even better: They let me see directly into the heart and soul of people who have made history. There was no interpretation or guesswork. The subjects were speaking directly to me, sometimes from across many centuries.

When I got into the martial arts, I naturally began reading martial arts biographies. The histories that existed then (the late 1970s and early '80s) were good reads, too. Tales of the monk named Bodhidharma, who introduced the Indian fighting arts and Dhyana (Zen) Buddhism to China, were fascinating. Accounts of kung fu men developing superhuman skills through meditation or a mix of alchemy and secret techniques were seductive. But they were more legend than history. Actual biographies—verifiable stories of the trials and successes of real masters and warriors—were the best. They showed all of us what is possible in the martial arts.

Two of the most influential martial arts autobiographies are Gichin Funakoshi's *Karate-Do: My Way of Life* and Eugen Herrigel's *Zen in the Art of Archery*. Funakoshi was the founder of *shotokan* karate and the man credited with introducing karate to Japan. In his book, he tells the history of the art in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as he experienced it. But what it really delivers is the story of a deeply moral and optimistic man who is a kind of karate missionary. Funakoshi comes across as someone who truly admired his teachers, felt warmly about the many friendships he made through karate and was devoted to the Confucian ideals of his art. He had faith in the moral lessons he learned through training and believed karate could make the world a better place.

Herrigel, on the other hand, was a German philosopher who took up Japanese archery to understand Zen Buddhism. His tales of struggling with the techniques of the bow and the paradoxical advice of his instructor, Kenzo Awa, are some of the best training stories ever written. My favorite passage is when, after trying to grasp some of Awa's advice, the frustrated philosopher retorts, "So I must become purposeless—on purpose?" Awa frankly replies, "No pupil has ever asked me that, so I don't know the right answer."

But the most famous passage is the awe-inspiring account of Awa's skills. To make a point about being "purposeless," the master archer hit

a bull's-eye and then split the first arrow with his second shot—all in a pitch-black room.

Those two books taught me a lot about being a martial artist, but they were also relatively old narratives. Both recount events that happened before World War II. By the time they had reached those of us growing up in the '70s and '80s, they were fascinating but distant history. What really inspired me were the recent narratives about travel, training, culture and fighting. Two in particular stand out: *Black Belt* columnist Dave Lowry's *Autumn Lightning: The Education of an American Samurai* and Mark Salzman's kung fu travel memoir, *Iron and Silk*.

Autumn Lightning is the story of Lowry's education in Japanese swordsmanship. It's the tale of someone who really went through a *Karate Kid*-type experience. At age 13, he discovered a master Japanese swordsman in his hometown and eventually became his student. But what he learned wasn't just how to wield a blade. What he got was a comprehensive education, and it shows on every page. The book is both a history of the Japanese martial arts and an account of learning to live according to samurai ideals. Lowry inspired a good kind of jealousy in many readers and a desire to find great instructors like his.

Salzman's book isn't as rich in content as Lowry's, but it is easily the more famous of the two. It tells the story of Salzman's two years (1982-1984) in China. The central thread is his study of kung fu with renowned master Pan Qing Fu. It has many funny anecdotes, like the strong *tai chi* push-hands master who, if people tried to hurt him during practice, would pick them up and squeeze them until they fainted. Those stories, along with tales of learning about cultural differences by trial and error, inspired many people to live and study the martial arts in Asia. Maybe if we couldn't find great masters in our backyard like Lowry did, we could find them in their home countries and have an adventure while doing it.

Many other books contain brief biographical asides, like Stephen K. Hayes' ninja series and Bruce Lee's texts. Some, like Joe Hyam's *Zen in the Martial Arts*, deliver them in a series of short essays about guys like Lee, Ed Parker and Mas Oyama. To some extent, all of them have influenced us. Sometimes they inspire us to go to the local *dojo* or to travel abroad and seek out good teachers. Sometimes they push us to be more than what we are, to try to measure up to the ideal they succeeded in measuring up to. But most of all, they give a shape to our vague longing to learn the martial arts. They show us what can be.

MYTHS AND MARTIAL ARTS

September 2003

When a person uses the word “myth,” he is usually pointing out that something is false. What’s more, he is claiming it’s a falsehood many people believe is true, such as urban myths about illegal kidney harvesting or murderous lunatics who make threatening calls from within their victim’s home. These stories aren’t true, but many people believe they are. They don’t seem especially powerful or meaningful. Maybe “myth” isn’t the right word for them.

A myth is a story meant to convey a fundamental truth or belief. Usually it’s a mixture of history and fantasy, a kind of cultural ideal. It is, in short, a story so compelling that it doesn’t fit into the easy categories of truth or falsehood.

The martial arts are full of myths. For instance, there are stories about Japanese warriors being taught swordsmanship by *tengu*, or mountain goblins. I don’t think anyone believes goblins were the origin of *kenjutsu*, but it’s still a story, not a lie. Some people think *tengu* were actually *yamabushi*, mountain ascetics whose ritual privations were supposed to give them special abilities. The underlying message is that the secrets of swordsmanship originated in a single-minded, religious devotion.

The *tengu* story is a little closer to what we normally think of as myth, but there are grander stories in the martial arts that mean a lot more to people. Two of the most popular are the myth of Shaolin Temple and the myth of Zen in the art of archery.

Most martial artists know the general outline of the Shaolin Temple story: A monk named Bodhidharma traveled from India to China as a missionary for Dhyana (Zen) Buddhism. He found the disciples there in poor physical shape, so he taught them exercises to improve their health, thus enabling them to meditate for longer periods. Those exercises eventually developed into an original martial art, from which all forms of kung fu, *kenpo* and karate descended.

Many writers and researchers believe this is myth, not history. There probably was a Bodhidharma, and there are historical records of fighting monks. But it’s unlikely that the Indian patriarch fathered the martial arts. Historians point to records of fighting arts in China long before Bodhidharma’s arrival. Also, the one work attributed to the Indian patriarch, the *I Chin Ching* (Muscle-Change Classic), suggests he taught the Chinese monks yoga, not kung fu.

So why was the story told to begin with, and why does it continue to be so compelling? Probably because it expresses the martial ideal better than the complicated, incomplete and sometimes contradictory facts of real history. Shaolin Temple was likely the first place in the world to produce what we think of as a martial art by combining wisdom, meditation, discipline and fighting skills into a way of life.

There were fighting arts in China before Bodhidharma, and there was Buddhism in China before him, too. But as Robert W. Young pointed out in the September 2001 issue of *Black Belt*, it's likely that warriors came to Shaolin Temple looking for sanctuary or redemption and brought their fighting skills into the religious life there. The truth in the Bodhidharma myth is that, through his insistence on mental and physical discipline tempered with wisdom, the Indian monk is more the father of the modern martial arts than the people who invented the techniques of fighting are.

The other myth that is dear to many martial artists is that of *Zen in the Art of Archery*. That's the title of a classic by German philosophy professor Eugen Herrigel. It's about learning *kyudo* in 1920s Japan from an enigmatic archery master named Kenzo Awa. It's probably the best story of a martial arts teacher/student relationship ever written, but at least one scholar has made a good case that it's a myth.

In the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* (2001, 28/1-2), Shoji Yamada published a paper that argued convincingly that Herrigel misunderstood a great deal of what was being said. Yamada claimed that Awa used the language of Buddhism to express ideas about archery that were unique to him. The master archer never studied with a Zen priest and was unusual among his peers in that he experienced a religious conversion through archery. Exchanges between Herrigel and Awa were often confusing—even when an interpreter was present—because Awa used Zen terms liberally to express his idiosyncratic ideas.

In short, Yamada argued that what Herrigel learned was not Zen and was not usual in *kyudo* instruction.

Does that mean Herrigel's classic is a sham? No. It's a myth in the best sense of the word. Awa really was a master archer. He really did undergo a spiritual transformation that he called a "great explosion," and it came through archery. Herrigel really did try to get at that experience through archery, too. His book carries the meaning of those experiences and delivers it to martial arts students in a way that only well-crafted literature can. In other words, it shows an ideal of martial arts study and insight, but it's not the best source on combat Zen, and it's not pure history.

Some people do not like this easy acceptance of myth in the martial arts. They like things to be clearly separated: Facts are here, lies are there and fairy tales are somewhere else. But it's natural to blend truth and fantasy to demonstrate an ideal, and without those ideals, we have nothing to strive for. Myths may not be history, but they change history by compelling us to reach for an ideal. And they show us why the martial arts are worth practicing.

IT'S ALL IN YOUR HEAD

October 2003

For people who are into sport fighting, the traditional martial arts seem like a mental fetish. There's a lot of talking and thinking going on but not much else. Even contemporary self-defense arts can be a little light on training and heavy on posturing and verbal behavior. It all seems like a cop-out to guys who value conditioning and winning matches above all else, but focusing only on sport can become a fetish, too.

For people obsessed with sport fighting, performance is everything. What they do in the ring or on the mat and how well they do it are the sole, proper focus of the martial arts. Sure, it may be a narrow focus, and fighting with rules, referees and time limits may be artificial, but it's reliable in a way that self-defense and the traditional arts are not. What fighters do in the ring is predictable and effective. The W's and L's on their records are decisive.

What doesn't seem to matter much here is what makes them able to perform in the ring at all. Sure, they talk about emotional problems affecting training or performance. Some even talk about the mental side of competition. But many just train hard and spar a lot, assuming that all that mental stuff will fall in line. They think they're being realists by focusing on results, but by ignoring their own minds, they're missing probably the biggest reality of any fighting art.

Fighting is, more than any other sport, affected by the competitor's state of mind. A well-conditioned athlete without an understanding of the strategies of and pressures in the ring is a sad specimen. Add to that the passions of anger, fear and pity all wrapped up in the question of why he's hurting another human being, and he's got a potent mental brew to deal with. Any fighter who ignores these things will never achieve the results he wants because he's ignoring reality.

What's more, valuing in-ring performance above everything else marginalizes the knowledge that helped get the fighter there. Most coaches and trainers can't do a fraction of what they get their athletes to do, but it doesn't mean their knowledge isn't valuable. Similarly, a fighter is lost without smart cornermen to shout advice and guide him through a bout.

Traditional martial artists have complained for decades that sport fighting misses the point. To them, fighting arts are about character development and

Asian metaphysics, while actual fighting is about life-and-death struggles. Wins and losses in the ring are superfluous.

Self-defense guys are the same. They may not have much interest in metaphysics and they may view karate and kung fu as museum pieces, but they still dismiss sport fighting as an artifact of the rules and judging. To them, scenario training, knowing danger signs and escaping from bad situations are what it's all about.

What these two points of view have in common is that they treat the martial arts as more mental than physical. Maybe sometimes they err by neglecting conditioning and sparring, but in the end, they both rate what goes on in our heads as most important for a reason. Thoughts and intuitions precede everything we do in the martial arts, and metaphysics can

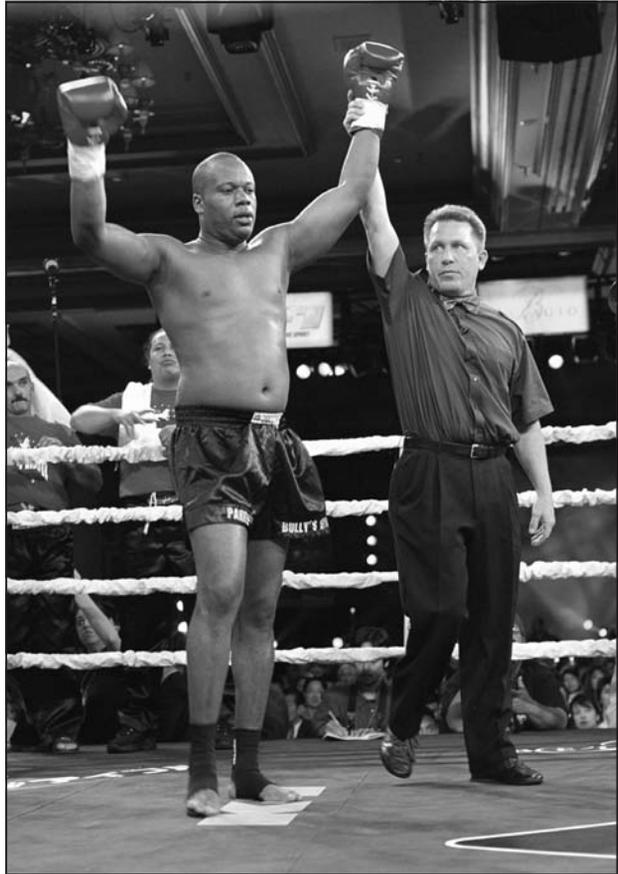


PHOTO BY ROBERT W. YOUNG

If a fighter focuses solely on his performance in the ring, he may end up undervaluing the contributions of his trainer or cornerman.

give us guiding principles for doing things—even in sport fighting. Focusing only on performances and results is empty.

DEFINING THE WARRIOR

November 2003

What is a warrior? What makes a warrior different from an Olympic athlete or an average person? Martial artists love to say, “I’m a warrior,” or “He’s a warrior,” but what exactly does it mean?

Being a warrior means having a certain attitude and outlook on life. It is not about macho pride. If you’re a warrior, that’s what you are. A Masai, an Apache, a samurai—they all had one thing in common: Whatever else they may have been, they were first and foremost warriors.

Just having the ability to fight with your fists or a weapon doesn’t make you a warrior. Anybody can learn to beat people up. Criminals and thugs do it every day. The ninja are often stylized as warriors, but they were not. They were spies and assassins. A ninja could be hired by person A to kill person B. The next day, the same ninja could be hired by the family of person B to kill person A. They followed the money, not the ideal.

A warrior takes his profession seriously because it’s not a hobby. If you are sloppy and perform in a halfhearted fashion, no one—including yourself—will take you seriously.

A warrior looks at things differently. He is a problem solver, not a whiner. He seeks maturity and wisdom. That’s not to say he doesn’t take risks. It’s just that his risks are calculated. Ask any paratrooper.

A warrior lives by a code. In the past, the tribes of Africa, the Americas and Europe lived in societies where locks were unnecessary. The Mongols reportedly possessed large amounts of gold and jewelry, as well as valuable rugs and tapestries, yet theft was rare. Yes, discipline was harsh, but it paid off by ingraining honesty.

The code a warrior lives by governs the way he interacts with the people around him. A U.S. Marine stands for something no matter where he is in the world, and his honor and that of the Corps go hand in hand. In a foreign land threatened by war, hunger or natural disaster, that Marine can represent hope and safety.

A warrior recognizes and respects other warriors, for they are his brothers and sisters. History is full of instances of the victor treating the vanquished with due regard because all warriors respect authority. They

often have people over them, and they obey their orders even when they don't agree with them. They may question, argue and rant, but in the long run, they obey.

A warrior studies his craft and is well-rounded. A naval officer does not have to understand ground combat, but he should know about the different types of ships and their weapons systems. A tanker does not need to know about ship movements, but he should know about the infantry he's supporting. The same thing applies in the martial arts. A *taekwondo* practitioner doesn't have to know grappling, but it might help in a bar fight.

The goal of a warrior's training is not competition. Tournaments may offer a good workout and are definitely fun, but they aren't the goal. Combat is. In today's society, we do not face constant combat like people did in the past, but the battle of civilization against chaos still rages. A warrior wages war—against injustice in the courtroom, against ignorance in the classroom, and against crime and drug addiction in the community.

A warrior understands restraint. He does not have to fight. A thug does. A warrior understands that sometimes it's better to retreat and choose his ground than it is to fight when the enemy may have the advantage.

You may be thinking, Where does this leave me?

It depends. How do you deal with challenges to your integrity? How do you treat people in positions of authority? How disciplined are you? Do you stand for something? Do you believe in anything? What is your code of conduct? Do you try each day to be a little better at what you do than the day before?

Those are questions only you can answer. And you have to answer them before you can answer the question, Am I a warrior?

THE CHOICE IS YOURS

December 2003

When a person first becomes interested in the martial arts, he starts asking questions. He asks about specific arts he's heard of or about different kinds of fighting sports. He wants to know what these arts are like, how they're practiced and so on. He might even inquire about the history and cultural background of the styles or ask for a demonstration. It's all part of forming an opinion and deciding which one is best for him.

Talking about opinions and deciding what's best for someone make all this sound arbitrary. A person taking up a martial art should have some

standard for separating good stuff from nonsense, right? But what if there are no consistent, objective standards? What if, at the bottom of it all, there really is nothing but a simple, arbitrary choice?

This kind of talk about personal choice in the fighting arts really irks some people. They think that personal choice is only marginally important in deciding anything. After all, we're all human beings with similar practical needs. What is best for one is probably best for everyone. The only choice is between being reasonable and facing facts, and following our feelings into a kung fu-theater fantasy world. But what are these facts, reasons and standards that we should submit to?

Facts are known things that we constantly negotiate. They are not higher entities that command or prohibit action. Sometimes we use facts. Sometimes we avoid or ignore them. Sometimes we even reshape them or dispose of them because of new knowledge. In other words, facts are partly solid and partly malleable, and they don't always reveal a clean, coherent truth. Social and psychological facts, like the facts of fighting, are especially tricky.

Even if the facts of fighting were always solid, they wouldn't interpret themselves, and they certainly wouldn't make up our minds for us. We all arrange the facts we learn in certain ways. We decide what they mean, draw conclusions and base standards on what we decide is important. Some people are impressed by crime statistics and case studies of assaults, so they judge all martial arts by how they can help them deal with urban crime. Some people are impressed by kickboxers and submission grapplers beating each other up in the ring, so they judge all arts by how well they fare in sport matches. Others are impressed by the civilizing effect of traditional arts, so they judge them by what kind of citizens they build. The point is, facts are neutral. We decide what they mean, and that decision has more to do with us than with any overarching, objective standard.

This doesn't mean we can't form any judgments. It means we choose the arts we like and then judge them by what they try to accomplish. If a traditional art like *aikido* or *shotokan* karate produces people of real moral substance, as well as some fighting skill, we judge it successful. If *muay Thai* doesn't produce people who performed well in the ring, it is a failure. The arts themselves tell you what their value is. It would be incredible if there were some standard outside the martial arts that we could judge them by. It would be even more incredible if that standard somehow managed to fit arts as different as archery, swordsmanship, *taekwondo*, *tai chi*, *jiu-jitsu* and *wushu*.

In the end, it all comes down to a groundless choice. We pick an art simply because we choose to act one way instead of another and then adopt its standards. The only other option is an infinite regress, looking for standards by which to judge our standards and then looking for yet more standards by which to judge the new ones. In other words, we're all in the same boat. We all make a choice, and it is ultimately no more or less reasonable than anyone else's. Respect in the martial arts begins with respecting that choice.

STANDING VALE TUDO?

January 2004

When fans talk about the development of the mixed martial arts, they like to call it “evolution.” What they mean is that it's changing from a shapeless, chaotic brawl into a well-defined fighting sport. Most imagine all of MMA to be moving toward a uniform blend of kickboxing and ground fighting, but real evolution doesn't work that way.

Evolution often develops things in unusual directions. Sure, most of the time in nature it gives us something we can safely call a mammal or a bird. But sometimes it throws us a curveball and yields a platypus. So if the fighting sports are a product of evolution, shootboxing is the platypus of MMA.

How could a fighting sport be like a platypus? Well, much like the duck-billed, egg-laying mammal, shootboxing frustrates easy definition. At first it looks like kickboxing—until you see guys win matches using throws. So it's the same as *sanshou*, right? Nope. Unlike in *sanshou* and other kickboxing-with-throwing sports, you can also win with arm locks and chokes. The catch is you can do them only while you're standing, for there is no ground fighting in shootboxing.

So what exactly is shootboxing, then? The promoters bill it as “standing *vale tudo*,” and that's probably the best definition there is. Just about every strike, throw and submission you can do on your feet is allowed. But is it MMA? Sure. It's a mix of standard kickboxing, wrestling, judo and jiu-jitsu techniques. In fact, kickboxer Caesar Takeshi created an MMA shootboxing organization in 1985—eight years before the Ultimate Fighting Championship debuted.

Still, most shootboxing matches are won with strikes. The promotion's current star, Andy Sauer, earned his belt at a tournament in which he KO'd

two opponents with body punches and outboxed another in the final. So people tend to write it off as kickboxing. But throws and standing submissions do happen. In fact, shootboxing's Ryuji Gotoh submitted a Chinese champ with a standing *kimura* arm lock earlier this year.

In reality, shootboxers are best-known for fighting in other promotions. Sauer, Hiroyuki Doi and Takehiro Murahama are all shootboxers who have fought in the K-1, and some of them have also competed in matches that allow ground fighting. The most famous of them occurred when Murahama fought Royler Gracie to a draw in the inaugural DEEP 2001 show.

The results of such events are generally mixed, but that's to be expected. Shootboxers develop a set of skills to fit standing vale tudo rules, and they're a little out of their element in ground-fighting or pure kickboxing shows. But the same can be said of other kinds of MMA fighters who enter Japan's shootboxing rings, where they rarely win matches against the top competitors. The most lopsided example of that happened in November 2001, when a Japanese team almost made a clean sweep of Brazil's Chute Boxe vale tudo team.

Success in one method of fighting doesn't necessarily translate into success in others, but that's no reason to dismiss any of them. The best thing about any form of MMA, including shootboxing, is that it reveals possibilities. MMA doesn't have to be just ground fighting kept honest with some striking. Just like other martial arts that have evolved in distant corners of the world, it showcases skills that are unusual and unusually well-tested. It shows that evolution doesn't always lead to the end we expect. But there is one thing it does produce: success.

ABANDONING TRADITION

March 2004

Everyone believes in progress—the notion that things can and should get better. Progress might mean increasing and improving knowledge. It might mean moving toward a more tolerant, pluralist society. Progress might mean a lot of things, but it usually involves discarding much of the past.

In the martial arts, progress definitely means getting rid of the past. It means trying to reduce a style to a simple set of efficient techniques devoid of metaphysics. Everyone from Bruce Lee to Rickson Gracie has done this because it's the basic philosophy of sport fighting and modern combatives.

Now we have what we want. Medieval Asian arts and their philoso-

phies are endangered species. We praise our modern attitude and vilify the superstitions of the past—so much so that exercise science and urban self-defense rule in the contemporary martial arts community. But is that really what we want? Is it really a good idea to discard all those old practices and ideas? Maybe not.

Metaphysics is not a mental disease. It's a natural expression of who we are and our relationship with the world. It's the story we tell ourselves about the world, the story we live. In some systems, it's a Confucian idealism that binds hard work, ethical conduct and familial relationships. In others, it's a Buddhist combination of physical discipline and meditation on the nature of reality. In those systems, as well as in arts that are imbued with animistic holism, traditions are not just quaint folkways. They are cosmologies, and they arose as naturally in mankind as anything else in our minds.

However, they are the very things we're moving away from in favor of leaner, meaner martial arts. Yesterday's ritual is today's ornament. Meditation, idealism, a sense of history, a connection with nature—they're all expendable. In their place, we have diet, flexibility, strength training and improved cardio conditioning. We have efficient answers and empty spaces where all that ornamental subjective stuff used to be. In short, we're losing some of the qualities that make martial artists human.

This tendency toward reduction and efficiency is everywhere. It's in business as much as science and the military. It's happening in Japan as much as in the United States. For example, the Japanese usually cremate their deceased in the name of efficiency, but as I recently witnessed, the streamlined process is horrible.

The ceremony I attended took place in a building where many other funerals were taking place. After some brief eulogies, family members gathered around the casket and put in flowers, letters and other sentimental things for the deceased. Then the casket was wheeled to the other side of the building, past a series of steel doors in a huge faux-marble hall. Behind each door was a blast furnace designed to quickly obliterate human bodies. Some cremations were just finishing, and others were still going on.

When it was our turn to put our loved one in the furnace, it had a hellish sense of finality. The body, casket, flowers, letters and artifacts would be blasted to cinders. It was as though simply dying wasn't good enough; the man's body had to be annihilated. After an hour, we returned and the family, in accordance with Buddhist custom, used chopsticks to place the deceased's bones in an urn.

This, of course, is only marginally similar to Japanese cremations in days past. Back then, funeral pyres were built and lit outside. As the body was burned, the spirit was seemingly carried to the heavens by the smoke. Do I really believe that's what happens? No, but the ritual seemed more like a natural transformation than a disposal. It was a more human way of dealing with a hard truth.

Likewise, in the martial arts, we used to have more human ways of dealing with the hard truths of violence. We learned metaphysics that placed our fighting—and fighting practice—in context. We studied idealism, meditated on reality and so on. We did seemingly unnecessary things because they were necessary to make sense of the world and remind us who we are. And that's something no stripped-down, ultra-efficient fighting style can ever do.

THE STAR TREATMENT

April 2004

How we treat other people is simple in theory: We treat them the way we want them to treat us. If we all follow this golden rule, everyone gets treated with kindness and respect. But life is rarely that simple, especially when fame is involved. That's when both celebrities and fans start giving each other the "star treatment."

Usually, giving someone the star treatment means giving him special privileges and luxuries. That's part of what I mean. But I'm also using the term to include all the ways—good and bad—celebrities and fans treat each other. That's when the golden rule gets warped by the wildly different expectations people have about how they should be treated.

In the martial arts, there are two kinds of celebrities: actors and fighters. They may be different professions, but the star treatment involved is similar. First, people generally treat action movie stars and top fighters a lot better or a lot worse than they expect to be treated themselves. People praise them, give them things and regard their opinions as treasures. But fans can also be cruel, invasive and even threatening. That's because public figures often get mistaken for public property.

Second, martial arts celebrities, like all celebrities, can easily get an inflated sense of self-worth or self-loathing. That is, when an actor or fighter is successful, a lot of people want to see him and talk to him, buy his merchandise and so on. So it's easy for him to believe everyone loves

him, cares about him and finds deep meaning in what he does. As a result, celebrities sometimes act like superior beings, like they are above things such as common courtesy and respect.

Likewise, when actors fall out of fashion and fighters hit losing streaks, they endure a lot of ridicule, get ignored and have to deal with a declining income. When that happens, it's easy for the star to believe it's the end of the world, everyone hates him and he's suffering this ignominy because he's a bad person. Celebrities who reach this point in their careers sometimes treat fans like enemies.

If you're the star, this feedback loop of fame twists your sense of how to treat people. You give them a spectacle and they like it. So they give you the opportunity to make a bigger and better show, which makes more people interested, and the cycle repeats. The more you succeed, the more you need the audience and the more they demand from you.

This is especially obvious in the fight game, in which fame and fandom are deeply personal. Fighters spend long hours in the gym training, sacrificing a normal life so they'll look good in the ring. Fans spend a lot of money on their favorite fighters, supporting their lifestyle because they've got a lot invested emotionally. When things go well, fighters get treated like war gods and often have egos to match. When they start losing, fans feel betrayed and ridicule their abilities and their character. It can happen in the space of one night, when a champ becomes a chump by losing badly, literally adding insult to injury.

Not all martial arts celebrities and fans get caught in this feedback loop, but it happens often enough that it's become a cliché. The best way to avoid giving or getting this kind of star treatment is to remember the golden rule: Put yourself in the other guy's place and treat him the way you'd want to be treated. It's something the stars and fans of the martial arts could use a little more of.

TRUTH SEEKERS

May 2004

When you're looking for the truth about something, you experience tension between what you know is true and what you imagine might be true. It's something you see most often in science and history. Some people stick close to solid facts and try to extend them a little at a time, discovering additional similar facts. Others have seemingly outlandish

ideas that go way beyond what is known. They try to find out what's true by making interesting guesses and then seeing whether the facts support them. The main thing these two groups have in common is that both have to check and see how their ideas match up with reality.

The martial arts world has both kinds of truth seekers. We've got people in the self-defense arts, martial sports and traditional martial arts trying to build on a knowledge of exercise science and ancient fighting techniques. We've also got people inventing new arts and guys digging up long-lost styles and legends, trying to make them work. What we don't have is people always checking to see how their ideas match up with reality.

Of course, the first thing that comes to mind when you mention ideas that don't mesh with reality is *chi* power. Chi is a fascinating concept, and there really are people out there studying it hard and trying their best to make it work. But for now, it's just an interesting idea, one that definitely won't save you from a beating.

While it's easy to dismiss chi power's true believers, no one in the martial arts should feel too superior. You don't have to get caught up in an interesting idea to get lost. Any martial artist—even those who stick close to the facts—can neglect to ensure that his ideas sync with reality.

Surprisingly, the one who seems most prone to this is the martial athlete. He builds on the basic facts of sports science, extending that knowledge by using it to get better at what he does. Boxing, wrestling and Brazilian *jiu-jitsu* are good examples of this. Some guys just get better at their particular set of fighting skills, but they never think of changing their skills to adapt to other kinds of fighting. They are the guys who get eaten up by more well-rounded fighters in no-holds-barred matches. Likewise, they never think of how to adapt to situations outside the ring—like self-defense. Just getting better at what they already know and extending it through strength and conditioning seems like the answer.

Martial athletes aren't alone, though. Traditional martial artists and self-defense practitioners start with something known; typically, it's a set of nonsport techniques like eye pokes, groin kicks and throat chops. When they start adding more techniques or modifying existing ones, it all seems to make sense. Because the extension seems reasonable, often they don't bother to see whether it really works. It's the kind of thing that happens when certain kinds of *kenpo* or kung fu are taken to extremes, but it can just as easily happen with a collection of gun and knife defenses. As the philosopher Paul Feyerabend wrote, an idea can be "simple, coherent and rational, and be about nothing at all."

That doesn't mean we should take the things we know lightly. Generalizing from what we know may not be perfect, but it's still pretty reliable. What the above examples do tell us is that we shouldn't have our judgment paralyzed or controlled by what we already know. Sometimes going beyond the facts and making interesting guesses works, and we discover things we never would have learned otherwise. I mean, who would have guessed 20 years ago that jiu-jitsu ground fighting would work as well as it does after having been developed to a high level in Brazil?

No one knows what we'll discover next. Maybe another traditional art will be crafted into something new and powerful like jiu-jitsu was. Maybe someone will find a way to make chi power work, although I doubt it. But my doubt shouldn't mean anything to anyone. You should ignore it as you push your art and your interests as far as they'll go. Maybe you'll be the one to discover something we never suspected. Just remember to make sure it really works.

SUPPORTING CAST

June 2004

If the mixed martial arts were a movie, the Japanese would be the henchmen—much like Oddjob, James Bond's nemesis in *Goldfinger*—whose job would be to tangle with the hero and fail. Or they might get to play the opponents in a Jean-Claude Van Damme *Bloodsport* flick, in which they would serve as fierce but ultimately inadequate competition for the star, who takes his licks but never loses.

It would be nice if Japanese fighters could sometimes be cast as powerful villains or even heroes, but it's rare. Outside Japan, they're just supporting actors who provide a dull background for American and Brazilian athletes.

It's an attitude that fighters and fans have but one that most seem unaware of. When "our" guy wins, it seems natural. We unconsciously assume that the Japanese opponent was tough but inferior; his loss confirms that the Japanese are weaker, less skilled, stunted by mindless adherence to tradition and so on. When a Japanese guy wins, it's a fluke or he cheated or the ref helped him or it was a work. Anything except that he was simply better than the American or Brazilian he happened to beat. That just isn't the way our mental script reads. Our guys aren't supposed to lose to the inferior group.

The most recent example of this was the fight between Takanori Gomi and Jadson Costa at PRIDE's Bushido 2 event. The up-and-coming lightweight from the Chute Boxe Academy had fought only a handful of matches, but because of his team's reputation, he got a shot at one of the best lightweights in the world, former Shooto champ Gomi. Many people were confident that even a Chute Boxe novice was better than a Japanese Shooto champ and picked Costa to win. But Gomi quickly took Costa down, dominated on the ground and beat on him until the ref stopped the bout. It wasn't a biased stoppage, either: The ref gave the Brazilian plenty of time to do something, but after Gomi landed 30 consecutive punches to Costa's head while he just lay there covering up, the official had no choice.

Those who've seen a lot of Gomi's fights weren't surprised that he dominated Costa. After all, the Japanese fighter went undefeated in Shooto for nearly four years. But Costa seemed not only surprised but also really ashamed. He wept as he left the ring and was full of rationalizations in a post-fight interview. He claimed that the ref helped Gomi by repositioning them and that none of the 30-plus unanswered punches bothered him. What he couldn't admit was that a Japanese champ was better than a Chute Boxe newcomer. It just doesn't make sense in the mental script of Chute Boxe fighters and fans. Supporting actors aren't supposed to kick the hero's butt.

It's unfair to pick on only Costa. Dismissal of the Japanese is a broad trend. It's partly because Shooto, Pancrase and shootboxing aren't seen outside Japan. Many people haven't witnessed how good the Japanese champions in smaller organizations really are.

But the big Japanese organizations are also to blame. They tend to gamble with their fighters. PRIDE, in particular, puts Japanese competitors in the ring with great fighters who are often two or three weight classes heavier. Predictably, the Japanese usually lose because of the weight difference, but when they win, it's like winning the lottery because no one really expected them to. That furthers the widespread belief that Japanese fighters are small and weak and it's a fluke when they win. Because PRIDE is the most visible Japanese mixed-martial arts event in the world, fans usually see Japanese fighters lose and, predictably, have a low opinion of them.

The only case in which a Japanese competitor has risen to hero/villain status is Kazushi Sakuraba. He was the only Japanese competitor in PRIDE who regularly defeated great fighters, famously beating four Gracies before succumbing to current champ Wanderlei Silva. But even here, the internal narrative of fight fans wins over reality. Sakuraba is the ex-

ception that proves the rule. Sure, he wins a lot, but he's the only one.

Wrong. He's just the only one people outside Japan see win spectacularly on a regular basis. So fight fans in the United States and elsewhere feel justified in their low opinion of him.

It's not just the fans who think that way. Lots of fighters have only faint praise for Japanese competitors, and some are openly dismissive in interviews. For instance, Sakuraba is considered one of the best fighters ever, but Rickson Gracie is on record saying the Japanese star is just lucky and not really a master of anything. Gracie built a worldwide reputation on being Brazilian *jiu-jitsu's* invincible champion, but he did so by beating Japanese fighters he seems to hold in low regard. The best thing he has to say about them is they're tough or they have a strong spirit. Once again, the Japanese aren't really seen as true challengers. They're just supporting actors, foils for the Brazilian hero.

Of course, the Japanese don't see themselves this way. Like fighters and fans everywhere, they have their own mental script, and they're the center of their own narrative. Japanese fans can be as ridiculously devoted as fans anywhere, and fighters there talk trash about opponents just like fighters



PHOTO BY YOSHINORI HARA

Like scores of his countrymen, Japanese fighter Takanori Gomi seldom earns the respect of Western fight fans despite his winning record.

everywhere. But if you really believe competition is more about individual skill and ability than it is about which group you belong to, it's time to put the nationalism away. There are no supporting actors in the mixed martial arts, only fierce competitors struggling to be the best.

THE INSECURITY ARGUMENT

July 2004

Recently, I heard a martial arts instructor give a brief psychology lecture to his students. He said people fight because they're insecure and full of fear and that they try to quell these feelings by beating people up. It's only a temporary fix, though, because the fear and insecurity soon resurface, and then they have to get in another fight to make them go away again. That, he claimed, is the mentality of the never-ending cycle of insecurity and aggression. He also said that the way out is through the martial arts because training makes you so confident in yourself and your abilities that you no longer need to fight.

I've heard instructors reason this way for years. There's some truth to it, but there's something doctrinaire about it, too. That is, it seems like something martial artists tell each other to reinforce a certain worldview—one that doesn't match the everyday experiences of a lot of people.

Everyday experiences tell us that people are aggressive for a lot of reasons. Ask 10 tough guys why they get in fights, and you're likely to get 10 different answers. Sure, some are insecure and fearful, and fighting does indeed placate their personal demons. But some are habitually violent because that's how they were raised. Others simply enjoy fighting. They might be unprincipled bullies or good citizens who happen to like sport fighting, but their main motivation is excitement. Furthermore, the causes of any one person's aggression can be a combination of those factors or something else entirely. Insecurity is only a slice of the pie graph.

Even when people fight out of insecurity, it's not necessarily irrational. Some fears are well-founded, especially for those who live in violent places. People in high-crime areas or countries with poor law enforcement aren't consumed by some vague feeling of inadequacy. They worry that if they can't fight, they will become victims of violence. This kind of fear and insecurity is very different from the kind many First World middle-class martial artists so easily dismiss.

So if insecurity isn't the root of all evil, why do so many martial artists

preach and accept that it is? Because it makes them feel pretty good about themselves. In this worldview, real martial artists don't fight, and they look down on people who do as pitiable social inferiors. Aggressive types are seen as tortured victims of their own ignorance who can be saved by



PHOTO BY ROBERT W. YOUNG

Fear and insecurity are the reasons some people take up the martial arts, but others do so because they live in violent regions or because they simply enjoy the excitement of personal combat.

learning about the cycle of violence and shedding their insecurity through martial arts practice. People who buy into the insecurity argument get to feel like social superiors and missionaries to lost souls.

The martial arts can change people's lives, but it's not always because a wise instructor has guided someone out of an abyss of fear and insecurity. Sometimes an instructor has to teach fear. He has to make students afraid of the damage fighting can do. People who battle on the street risk serious injury and death, not just to themselves but to the people they engage. Everyone should be afraid of those consequences.

Sometimes even insecurity can be a good thing. Some students are too confident about their fighting skills or their moral judgment. They need a good instructor to show them that they're not the second coming of Bruce Lee or to teach them to doubt themselves a little if they're too willing to right wrongs with their fists.

The important thing to remember is that there's some truth to the insecurity argument. But it's not the whole story, and it's certainly not something that should make any martial artist feel like a superior being. Every good instructor finds out who his students are and what they need before he teaches them anything. Everyone who is changed by the martial arts finds something he needs in them that touches him deeply. Stories that explain these things, like those about liberation from fear and insecurity, come after the fact.

MIND-BODY UNIFICATION

August 2004

It's a cliché that martial arts are a way of uniting the mind and body. This unity is supposed to somehow make you a better person. If you believe it, you're in good company, for some of the greatest martial artists of our time have subscribed to it. But if you don't understand it, you're not alone.

A martial art is a collection of movements practiced for the sake of fighting; this is what separates the martial arts from other physical arts. It's the "body" referred to in our premise. Some people may practice the arts for exercise or aesthetics, but those reasons will always be secondary. The martial arts are primarily about fighting, or they're about nothing at all.

That's because the martial arts also involve a deep devotion to an ideal—the "mind" of our premise. A martial artist becomes a good fighter to show that the ideal he holds precious is right and true. He demonstrates

that by fighting and winning in competition or self-defense. Others then have a reason to believe in the principles he lives by and in the skills he's developed. Conversely, if a martial artist cannot fight well, it casts doubt on his ideal. That's why unity of mind and body is so important. It really means unity of action and thought with the goal of keeping you and your ideal alive.

But the question remains: How does this make you a better person? Unity of mind and body balances the martial artist. It transforms the brute into a considerate person by lending reason to his actions. It tempers a passion for fighting with a need to do what's right. It also makes the philosophical person more real by lending action to his thoughts. His ideal becomes tangible in his movements. He becomes his ideal.

To some, this need for unity of mind and body may be unimportant. Some believe street self-defense is all that matters. They believe philosophy is a sham perpetuated by fools and fast-buck artists. That's a valid and valuable criticism because, in the martial arts, philosophy divorced from proven skill is self-destructive. But the fighter who has no philosophical teachings to reason with is equally self-destructive. Anyone who excels at hurting his fellow man must have an acute sense of right and wrong, or he will fall into ruin.

Indiscriminately hurting people obviously leads to alienation from the bulk of society. We assume that people around us have a basic respect for our well-being. They may not like us or even know us, but we trust they won't harm us. A brute cannot be trusted. On a whim, he breaks bodies and inspires fear and hatred. Who could befriend or even work with such a person? Who could love him?

A less obvious consequence of harm-without-reason is the self-hatred of those who inflict it. Except for sociopaths, people feel guilt and shame over having hurt someone. That presents a problem for a person who likes fighting: The more he fights, the more he hurts others; the more he hurts others, the less he likes himself. This self-hatred eventually translates into further aggression in a vicious cycle that can lead to self-destruction.

The key to escaping or avoiding this cycle lies in thought and contemplation. Action makes a person who he is, but thought changes him and, consequently, the action he takes. So the salvation of the brute lies in understanding what's good and right and true (i.e. philosophy). It's not something he pursues for leisure's sake. He needs it to keep his soul at peace; he seeks it out of desperation.

This pattern is not typical in the contemporary martial arts, however.

Many want to participate in an ideal through the ritualistic action of the arts. They want to feel the mysterious Tao (universal way) in the movements of *tai chi chuan* or the Buddha's enlightenment in the practice of *kata*. Actual fighting is the last thing on their minds.

This is noble but mistaken. Hurting people is wrong, and it's understandable that a thoughtful, sensitive person would find it distasteful. But the martial arts touch those ideals through the action of fighting. If a person wants to experience them, he must compete in some way, or he should find a different way to achieve enlightenment or harmony with the Tao.

EXPOSED

October 2004

Last year, the Ultimate Fighting Championship's No. 1 contender, Chuck Liddell, went through a tough period. He battled Randy Couture for the light-heavyweight title and lost. Then he entered the PRIDE Middleweight Grand Prix and was eliminated in the semifinals by Quinton Jackson. Because of that, many fight writers and fans said he had been "exposed." In fact, one writer said that Liddell's losses had "exposed him as a sloppy headhunter."

Exposed. I started noticing the word everywhere. Every time a fighter lost, it seemed that someone, somewhere would claim he'd been exposed. It happened when former champ Tito Ortiz lost to Liddell. It happened when Antonio Rodrigo "Minotouro" Nogueira beat Mirko "Cro Cop" Filipovic. It happened most recently in April when Wladimir Klitschko lost his World Boxing Organization belt to fringe contender Lamon Brewster.

Sometimes it's accurate to say a fighter was exposed because some are more hype than substance. But Liddell? How could a fighter who is arguably all substance and no hype be exposed? How could a fierce contender with such a great record be exposed? For that matter, how could any fighter with a winning record secretly be a loser? It got under my skin and made me wonder, What do people mean when they say a fighter was exposed?

Whenever something's exposed, the implication is that it was hidden before. In the case of fighters, they try to conceal their weaknesses, but there's nothing crooked about that. When they're hiding their weaknesses, they aren't trying to swindle fight fans. They're trying to protect themselves in the ring by fooling their opponents. Of course, it doesn't always work. Sometimes one fighter figures out his opponent, beats him badly and reveals

his weaknesses to the world. That's when it's fair and honest to describe someone as having been exposed.

What doesn't seem fair or honest is describing a fallen fighter as if he were a fraud. When people say he was exposed, they're often making a global judgment. They're saying his loss is what really counts and all his past efforts and achievements don't matter. His persona becomes tainted by weakness, and people get suspicious that weakness is his defining characteristic. Even a great fighter like Liddell, who has defeated most of the top athletes in his weight class, can get treated like he was secretly a loser all along.

This kind of judgment is unfair and dishonest because it's not about the fighter; it's about his image. Being on a long winning streak makes a pro fighter appear superhuman. He seems immune to common frailty and weakness. It's only when he loses and proves he's undeniably human that the disappointment sets in. That's when fans and writers get upset that their fighter failed to live up to their ideal. So they start acting like jilted lovers. They judge him by what they wanted him to be instead of what he is.

Liddell and other top fighters who lose from time to time weren't exposed. There wasn't any fraud brought to light. What we saw were lapses in judgment, discipline, focus, training or motivation. Sometimes they simply found someone they couldn't beat no matter what they did. But there wasn't anything in those fights that we didn't know could happen, and none of it needed deep character flaws to explain.

The only people exposed were the idealists. They showed that they're mostly interested in what they think a fighter should be, not what he is. They're longing for a hero that will never exist. That means they'll be forced to continue longing for the ideal and criticizing fighters for not measuring up.

GOING FROM AMATEUR TO PRO IN JAPAN

November 2004

Times change, and our collective dreams change with them. About 30 or 40 years ago, most martial artists dreamed of traveling to Asia to study a traditional art. It was a time when Westerners were exploring the martial ideals of the Far East and testing their fighting methods. It was a time when people were searching in earnest for a meaningful alternative to pure athletics, something that was as much philosophy as it was fighting.

Today, some people still dream the old dream of going to Asia and immersing themselves in the traditional arts. But there's a new one, too. In the past 10 years, the mixed martial arts have gone from being a regional tradition in Brazil to an underground phenomenon in the United States to the biggest prime-time fight sport in Japan. That rise has led many martial artists to dream of coming to Asia to fight for money and fame in events like PRIDE or K-1.

So how does it happen? How do you get a shot at being a fighting star in Japan? The easy answer is that you become a top fighter in your own country first. Indeed, there's a long list of former Ultimate Fighting Championship veterans who're now fighting in Japan. But there are other ways to accomplish this besides being a top-10 fighter.

The first way to get into mixed-martial arts fighting in Japan is to join a famous gym. There are a lot of them in major cities like Tokyo, Yokohama and Osaka. When promoters put events together, they contact gyms looking for competitors. If you're there working hard all the time, you might impress your coaches and get put on a fight card in a small event. Success there could lead to bigger things.

Getting on a fight team is a little more involved. Instead of just paying a monthly fee, training diligently and hoping to get a shot, you can try to become an *uchideshi*. The term refers to a kind of live-in apprentice fighter. You don't pay for training. Rather, you sweep floors, clean toilets, do laundry and cook meals for the established fighters. You get more and better training than most up-and-coming fighters, but it's a hard life. By the time you get in the big shows, you've paid your dues in injuries and humiliation.

One odd way to break into MMA in Japan is through pro wrestling. Many Japanese MMA stars are or were pro wrestlers, and there are a number of wrestling promotions here. You may be able to become an *uchideshi* in a pro-wrestling gym, eventually do some studio wrestling and then make a lateral move into MMA. While that's not the recommended way to get real fights, it is possible.

The strategy I advocate for breaking into the big shows is to fight your way up through the amateur ranks. Shooto and shootboxing have systems for developing amateur talent for their main cards. Pancrase and ZST have amateurs fight on their undercards to give athletes a chance at turning pro. Even PRIDE has held amateur events—including the old Pre-PRIDE tournaments, which were also a kind of reality-TV show, and the current PRIDE Challenge events.

Does anyone who fights in one of these events actually get into the big



PHOTO BY ROBERT W. YOUNG

The dream of many 21st-century practitioners is to journey to Japan and become a mixed-martial arts star. (For illustrative purposes, Alexander Otsuka is shown greeting his fans.)

shows? They do. Some have fought in DEEP and The BEST (PRIDE's old B-level show). A man named Eiji Mitsuoka has fought in both King of the Cage and Bushido.

One thing I should make clear is that these are just possibilities. Nothing you can do guarantees you'll become a star in Japan. That kind of success is as much the result of luck and self-promotion as it is skill. You might never get a pro fight. I've fought in PRIDE's amateur events and so have a lot of guys I know. Only a few have gone on to have professional MMA careers. But if you want to take a shot at it, this information can serve as a guide.

INNATE TENDENCIES

December 2004

Many people believe that aggression is innate and that human beings are born with violent tendencies. I'm one of them. Some people who think aggression is innate believe that we, as a species, are doomed to an endless cycle of conflict, murder and war because of it. I'm not one of them.

The reason I don't believe violence and war are inevitable is because of my experience in the martial arts. After being involved in the fighting arts for 20 years, I can say I've seen a lot of people learn how to be decent human beings. They learned what hurting people is all about and why it's wrong. They learned about their own aggressive tendencies—how to express them and how to deal with them. They learned that aggressive tendencies don't inevitably lead to violence.

That may seem obvious, but there are reasons to believe we're kidding ourselves. Primate studies and some anthropological research suggest that humans have a default setting for violence. Scientists have learned that



PHOTO BY ROBERT W. YOUNG

Martial artists choose a life that involves almost constant low-level violence, yet they seldom become aggressive citizens or violent criminals.

chimps and primitive people both tend to wage constant low-level war on their own kind. The fact that this type of violence happens so often in so many places suggests it's part of being human. No matter what we do, we can't avoid sliding back toward violent conflict.

But even if that's true, there's violence and then there's violence. Martial artists live with and enjoy a constant, low level of violence. They live at that default setting and defy tragedy. They make an art out of aggression and shape a morality in reaction to it. Even if they're born aggressive, they show that they are what they choose to be.

This collection of choices cannot be overstated. Aggression is an innate tendency, not an instinct. The form of human aggression isn't determined in the same way the shape of a spider's web or a bird's nest is. Human violence, from a fistfight to the waging of war, is a product of conscious choices. We decide when and how we clash with each other. We decide whether it's right or wrong. We decide what it means to be an aggressive species.

A discussion of the kinds of choices we must make when it comes to violent behavior or supporting a war is too much to get into here. The fact that they are choices and not blind instincts is what counts. Moreover, the fact that martial artists regularly deal with these choices on a personal level makes us important. It's one thing to talk in high abstractions about international relations and human nature, but it's another thing entirely to convince a 14-year-old that you can't kick a guy in the head just because he insults you. The abstractions are important, but teaching a simple truth to someone can make the world a better place.

In short, the tragic view that we're doomed to hurt and kill each other reflects only one possible future. If we decide that violence is inevitable, it almost certainly will be. But things don't have to be that way. If we martial artists can find ways to civilize basic, physical aggression, we can certainly find answers to the larger problems of group violence and war. But the first step is to decide that's what we want.

DO THE RIGHT THING

January 2005

I have a friend who has a black belt in karate. He learned all his *kata*, participated in a lot of tournaments, did his share of teaching and paid all his *dojo* fees. What's more, he now has his own dojo, where he's been teaching his traditional style for years. He's taken it as far as he can, however,

and now wants to explore other training methods. But when he started doing that, the head of his original style demanded that he “do the right thing” and return his black-belt certificates.

This kind of thing happens all the time, and it’s absurd. How can you not be a black belt if you’ve done everything that makes a person a black belt in a given style? How does your past suddenly become erased because of what you do in the present?

It doesn’t.

A black belt is a recognition of achievement. It’s more like a diploma than anything else. You pay tuition, study, struggle, fulfill requirements, get tested and eventually reach a certain level of expertise. When you’re done with college, your degree is yours forever. Why should it be any different for a black-belt certificate?

But many people who run organizations and collect fees for granting black belts see things differently. They think of a martial arts rank certificate as being more like a military rank or a professional license. They view it as a grant of responsibility or permission, a thing that can be maintained only by doing as they say or paying what they ask.

Seeing a black belt as a pseudo-military rank is the stranger and more unsettling view. In this case, a martial art is a metaphorical army whereby a first-degree black belt is seen as a low-ranking officer and higher degrees



PHOTO BY RICK HUSTEAD

Earning a black belt in a martial art is equivalent to obtaining a college diploma. No one can take away rank once it’s given because the skills and knowledge always remain.

correspond roughly to majors, colonels and generals. The head of the style is the commander in chief. Everyone is given a job to do to advance the art as a whole, and personal sacrifice is a cardinal virtue. When someone gets his rank taken away in this kind of martial art, it's because he isn't working toward the group's goals or isn't doing it in the prescribed way. He's shirked his responsibilities, the black belt is revoked and he's no longer allowed to be in charge of lower-ranked students.

The reason it's so strange is that the martial arts aren't military organizations. They don't, as a group, prepare for wars, and they certainly don't wage them. In fact, martial arts schools barely coordinate their efforts with other establishments. A martial arts school is a place where people learn a skill or art and pay money for that privilege. The instructor is an educator or coach, not a platoon leader. Taking away a person's black belt doesn't take away his command because he never had one. All it does is take away an endorsement that students may or may not care about.

Some people might argue that a martial art is more like a business or religion. You lose your place in those kinds of organizations because you're not doing your job or you're a heretic, but these things don't take away your rank. A high-level manager can do a lousy job and get fired, but nobody can rescind his MBA. A priest can lose his faith and leave the church, but he still has his theology degree.

Seeing a black belt as permission to teach a style has its own set of problems. First, it confuses the actual achievement of getting a black belt with licensure. If you pass a test of physical skill and cultural knowledge, that's the end of it. You have that skill and knowledge. Maintaining a professional license is about what you do with your expertise. It's like being a doctor, lawyer or teacher: Anyone who gets a degree in these fields knows how to practice medicine, practice law or teach. But maintaining a license to legally do so means maintaining certain professional standards.

The second problem is with the authority of the martial arts organizations that see themselves as licensing bodies. Giving someone a license to teach a certain style usually amounts to little more than a personal endorsement, so taking away that endorsement doesn't really change much. A lawyer who's disbarred can't practice law, but a karate instructor who gets excommunicated from his style's organization can still teach karate.

In short, it's absurd to revoke a black belt. Having one is something people work hard for and are rightly proud of. You might give up your allegiance to an instructor, style or organization, but that belt and what it means are always yours.

When I visited my friend again, I jokingly asked whether he had done the right thing and relinquished his black-belt certificates. He smiled and said, “Yeah, I did the right thing. I kept them.”

SUMO'S GOODBYES

February 2005

In the martial sport of sumo, *yokozuna* (grand champions) are rare. They're at the pinnacle of the art, and it's extremely difficult to get there. To become a yokozuna, a top-ranked wrestler has to win two consecutive tournaments. Then the Japan Sumo Association decides whether his character is up to snuff before officially declaring him the sport's standard-bearer. There have been only 68 yokozuna in the past 400 years, so when one retires, it's a big deal.

In October 2004, I attended the retirement ceremony of a foreign yokozuna, Hawaii's Musashimaru. The gigantic wrestler, who stands 6 feet 3 inches tall and weighs nearly 500 pounds, had a chronic wrist injury that was forcing him out of the game—and “forcing” is the right word. When you're a yokozuna, there's no drop in rank: Either you keep on winning or you retire.

The ceremony, which took place in Tokyo's Kokugikan Sumo Hall, showed how far the sport reaches into Japanese culture. Some of the rituals were echoes of another time. For example, six wrestlers took turns singing a poem about Musashimaru's feats in the ring—much like the way heroes were honored in the past at public gatherings or the way epic stories were recounted.

Sumo's influence on current culture was also on display in the diversity of people involved in the topknot-cutting, the ceremony that signals the end of a wrestler's career. When one retires, his topknot is besieged by a parade of supporters, each of whom comes up and snips off a lock of hair. The wrestler's *oyokata* (stable manager) approaches last and shears off the whole thing.

In Musashimaru's case, it seemed like everyone showed up to cut his locks. He sat on a chair in the center of the ring wearing formal Japanese robes while politicians, executives, actors, monks, professors, comedians and rock stars took turns with the scissors. The people who really stood out were the guys from the fight game. PRIDE boss Nobuyuki Sakakibara was on hand as well as fighter Enson Inoue. K-1 star Ray Sefo took a turn

with the scissors, too, as did former sumo champ Konishiki. It seemed like someone from every corner of Japanese life was there to give him a big send-off.

So what's the big deal? Why are so many people moved by an overweight guy who excels at ritualized shoving? First, it's because sumo is as old as Japanese culture itself. Seasonal sumo tournaments have been around longer than written history. There's even a Shinto legend that tells how two gods fought a sumo match to determine who owned Japan.

Second, sumo isn't a museum piece. It may showcase archaic ideals of strength and decorum, but it's still a competitive fight sport. Unlike other events that rely heavily on judging, sumo matches are decisive and exciting. Even if the rituals and ideals are antiquated, the action of the bouts is very much alive.

The point is, a guy like Musashimaru is living history. A yokozuna represents the best of a tradition that permeates Japanese culture and fight sports in particular. Everything from the long introductions at the beginning of matches to the structure of yearly event schedules shows the art's influence on the fight game. But more important, sumo champs are an example of what a champion in any sport should be: strong, humble and successful.

THE IDEAL MARTIAL ARTIST

March 2005

When you call someone idealistic, it's a mild put-down. It's like saying the person has a beautiful imagination that makes him ignore facts and do stupid things. While this is sometimes true, it misses the real value of idealism. It's about more than the reality we have. It's about what could be.

The challenge of idealism lies in making sure your visions of what could be are possible. For instance, it's possible to sharpen your martial intuition through religious meditation. Unusual, but possible. If you want to learn to levitate by honing your powers of concentration, however, you've crossed over into the realm of fantasy.

Aside from dreams about developing paranormal powers, there's still a lot of reality to negotiate. There are many physical, ethical and mystical martial arts ideals people try to (or long to) attain. Each one has its own powers and pitfalls. To consider them, think about what an ideal martial

artist would be.

The physically ideal martial artist is a combination of fitness and skill. He's strong and flexible and has great endurance, but these traits are only a support structure for his preternatural abilities. He's a triumph of skill over physical limitations—able to hit without being hit and to knock out opponents who are bigger and stronger. He can take down people effortlessly and submit them. He can win fights using sticks and knives and defend himself against such weapons using his empty hands. In short, he has a solution to any problem that might arise in hand-to-hand-combat.

Next is the ethically ideal martial artist. He's humble about his skills and extremely reluctant to use them. He's kind and respectful to others, and observes a pacifism that comes from an intimate understanding of the consequences of violence. He's honest and unafraid of pointing out cruelty and dishonesty whenever and wherever he sees them. He shows the value of ethics by living them every day.

Finally, there's the ideal mystical martial artist. He's a person who thinks deeply about the nature of being. He knows separateness is an illusion and sees everything as one continuous entity. His insights expand his intuition and make him a better fighter. He weaves his actions and insights together to create an art so compelling it outlives him by centuries.

The pitfalls of these ideals are obvious. First, we're all limited by time and genetics. There's only so much our bodies can do physically and only so much time in which we can develop our skills. No one can master everything in the martial arts in one lifetime.

Second, no one has an unerring sense of right and wrong. We all, whether by accident or design, do the wrong thing sometimes. No one is unfailingly virtuous.

Third, it's all too easy for a compelling vision to turn into a fantasy. Seeing the world as one continuous thing can help you deal with reality, or it can allow you to ignore it. How you ultimately live your life is a matter of spiritual honesty and simple discipline.

In spite of the fact no one can ever live up to these ideals, they serve an important purpose. They draw us out of our ordinary selves and force us to be more than everyday life asks us to be. This is something that simple realism can't do. That's why "idealistic" shouldn't be pejorative. It's what saves us from surrendering to the ordinary.

MENTORS

April 2005

Once you reach a certain age, you become a mentor for younger martial artists. It doesn't matter if you didn't plan on it; it just happens. The younger students look at the middle-age *karateka* in the training hall and expect something. Sometimes, they just want a little wisdom or a point of view they can trust. Often, they're looking for someone to emulate, someone who already is what they'd like to become.

It's an odd feeling. Like when you're a new parent, you find yourself cast in a role you're unaccustomed to. You may not feel any different than you did in your youth, but now you've got to be more than you were. Juniors ask probing questions about your fighting art and its place in the grand scheme of things. They ask hard technical questions about how your art works—or doesn't. In turn, you feel more responsible for the things you say or do, and frankly, you start wondering how much of your input is really worth anything at all.

Of course, it's reasonable for juniors to have this kind of relationship with seniors; it's part of the natural hierarchy of the martial arts. Those who are older generally know more and understand the philosophies and techniques better. What's odd is when you suddenly realize you're the senior. You—that person in the mirror you find hard to take seriously—have to show some substance and make sense.

For some people, that's not a problem. Some guys who've reached a certain age automatically assume they should be listened to or consulted. They like to think of themselves as authorities and enjoy hearing the sound of their own voice. Juniors in the training hall hear from them whether they want to or not and quickly form their own opinions. Often, those opinions are quite insightful because the younger students tend to reflect on a pompous senior's words more than he does.

For others, however, being a mentor is more of a struggle. They feel a duty to be honest and coherent but don't always have ready answers. Even when they do, they're reluctant to lecture anyone because they know how unwelcome such diatribes usually are. These seniors are the real treasures in any training hall because they're not just blowing hot air. They really are trying hard to live up to the reasonable expectations of their juniors.

Sometimes what senior martial artists have to offer is technical. For instance, I've heard older kickboxers matter-of-factly guide younger fighters through sparring sessions. Their advice can seem offensively obvious: "If

you don't hit him, he's got no reason to stay away." However, it's hard to think straight when you're getting kicked in the face, so having someone remind you of those simple things you tend to forget in the heat of sparring is a real help, not an insult.

Other times, what senior martial artists have to offer is more substantial. Age and experience give them a perspective that young people sometimes need. I remember when I was a teenager rehearsing a kind of righteous tough-guy image at the *dojo*. Some of the older practitioners in my karate class were in their 40s; they knew about killing and dying from their war experiences, and they set me straight. It wasn't a lecture but a question-and-answer session: I answered their questions until we both realized I didn't know anything about real violence.

Both my experience and the example from the boxing gym represent genuine attempts at mentoring. There were no harsh commands or rehearsed monologues. There was no mocking or humiliation. There were only older practitioners trying their best to guide younger ones when they needed it—guys trying to make sure they were worth listening to.

In the end, when it comes to being a good mentor, seniority in the dojo isn't the only thing that counts. What matters is that your efforts are about more than just yourself. Your martial arts skill gains depth, coherence and meaning—not just for you but for others who are looking for answers, too. All longtime martial artists end up being mentors whether they like it or not. What counts is being a good one.

ANGER IS BLINDNESS

May 2005

A few sayings often come to mind when I write about the martial arts. One of them is, "Anger is blindness." It comes from the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*, a religious story about a war between cousins. The saying applies because it sums up one of the very human problems that the martial arts have to deal with: It's easier to satisfy anger than it is to know what's right.

Sometimes this is as simple as getting caught up in the heat of the moment. You feel slighted, argue with someone and fail to see his point of view. Things escalate into shouting, and nothing gets resolved because you don't really want it to. You just shout down whomever you're arguing with, and only later do you think about what he actually said.

Simple anger like this is nothing to martial artists. It's just a lot of noise, and the only thing that gets hurt is someone's pride. However, all too often wounded pride leads to wounded people. When words don't seem like enough, some people decide to satisfy their anger in the most basic way possible: They make the other person physically suffer. An argument turns into assault and then injury—sometimes fatal. Afterward, there's regret when the police and courts get involved and the damage that's been done becomes clearer. At the time, however, anger was all they could see.

That's why self-discipline is the first thing you learn in the training hall. You learn to put away your anger before it blinds you to the cause or consequence of fighting and turns you into the bad guy. It's a rule of thumb that every martial arts instructor teaches—or should teach. As soon as you feel like pounding someone's face in, you're already on the wrong path. Self-defense should be a chore you occasionally have to do, not an appetite you satisfy. Ideally, fighting is something you do with no more passion than chopping down a tree.

But anger isn't always simple, and its blindness can do more than cloud judgment. Sometimes it replaces judgment. Sometimes anger becomes generalized and moral blindness becomes a first principle. You learn to hate whole groups of people and then decide they deserve injury or death. Satisfying vengeful feelings becomes about something bigger than you. It becomes the delusion that revenge is right and moral.

This is where the self-discipline of the martial arts should extend into everyday life. When your pride is hurt, you learn to check your anger in the heat of the moment and follow the cold calculation of self-defense. You do what's right, not what your anger tells you to do. That discipline should extend to how you judge other races and religions. Anytime you think someone deserves to be brutalized because of his skin color, political beliefs or religion, your judgment has been eclipsed. Your dark feelings have become more important than your respect for violence or the need to do what's right.

I hope the lessons of the martial arts can displace this kind of sustained anger. I hope learning how to hurt people with their bare hands can change men's hearts. I hope it can help them see more clearly where hate and vengeance lead and why they're wrong.

Like I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the saying, "Anger is blindness," comes from a story of internecine war. One prince can't see past his rivalry with his cousins. He's the cause of the war, and he passes up many chances to avert it because of his own moral blindness. To me,

the lesson to be learned is that everything from fistfights to international conflicts depends on seeing past our anger and making sure what we're doing is right. And that's just what the martial arts teach.

JUDO FINALLY EMBRACES MMA

July 2005

Over the past 12 years, we've seen a lot of experiments in mixed-martial arts fighting, but it's hard to remember that because heavily cross-trained fighters with no stylistic loyalties dominate the cage these days. It seems like it was 100 years ago when karate, *kenpo*, *wing chun* and *silat* guys shared the octagon with wrestlers, kickboxers and Brazilian *jiu-jitsu* practitioners.

Those early experiments were interesting because no one knew what to expect. We really wanted to see what would happen when a kung fu guy fought a jiu-jitsu expert or a kickboxer faced a wrestler. Over the course of a few years, however, it became obvious that some styles were suited for the octagon and some weren't.

It also became clear that you needed some kind of sport-fighting background to be successful. Those who had competed extensively in kickboxing, wrestling, jiu-jitsu or *sambo* were the most comfortable in the octagon. They were used to the rules and rounds, and they could handle having limitations put on their techniques. They knew precisely how well they could give or take a beating because they'd already done it hundreds of times. However, those who didn't have that background, including most traditional martial artists, simply stopped signing up to compete.

There was one glaring exception, though. One traditional martial art had a thorough system of international competition all the way up to the Olympic level. It had a deep talent pool well-versed in throws, submissions and ground grappling. That art was judo, but it was strangely underrepresented in MMA fighting.

For most of the past 10 years, judo was the major holdout among fighting sports. With the exception of two nationally ranked *judoka*—Chris Leininger and Remco Pardoel in the early Ultimate Fighting Championship competitions—and two Olympic medalists—Ben Spijkers and Naoya Ogawa—there were no high-level judo players in the ring or the cage. Some didn't compete because doing so would mean the end of their amateur careers, while others saw MMA as a step backward in the development of

the arts. Still others just weren't interested.

However, in the past two years, the judo community has apparently changed its mind and embraced MMA. The turning point seemed to be when 1992 Olympic gold-medalist Hidehiko Yoshida crossed over to MMA. Unlike Spijkers, who went 0-2 before quickly dropping out of sight, Yoshida fought some great battles and earned a winning record. In his first year of competition, he submitted a former UFC champion and a K-1 star and even tapped out one of Japan's best submission wrestlers, Kiyoshi Tamura.

Ogawa had a winning record, too, but it wasn't the same. He'd left judo behind to become a pro wrestler. Yoshida was the first purely judo icon to hit MMA, and his participation seemed to draw more top judo talent into the sport.

The first to follow Yoshida was his protégé, Kazuhiro Nakamura. The 26-year-old nationally ranked judoka has beaten K-1 great Stefan Leko and former UFC champ Murilo Bustamante. Over the past three years, he's worked up a record of 5-3 and is currently agitating for a fight with Ryan Gracie, calling out the Brazilian every chance he gets.

Next came two international champs, Yoshihiro Akiyama and Makoto Takimoto. Akiyama, who has won a few continental and world cup tournaments, is best-known for easily submitting former heavyweight boxing titleholder Frans Botha. Takimoto is an Olympic gold medalist who used to dismiss MMA, but on December 31, 2004, he took a bout against former sumo wrestler Henry "Sentoryu" Miller. After eking out a controversial decision, Takimoto let the crowd know that the sport was a lot tougher than he thought and that he was dedicated to being an MMA champion.

Now, it seems that every month a new judo champ is clamoring to fight



PHOTO BY RICK HUSTEAD

Karo Parisyan is one of many judo practitioners now thriving in mixed-martial arts competition.

in the big shows. A Korean heavyweight judoka and Olympic silver medalist signed on to fight Bob Sapp in a K-1 show. Another Korean medalist, Yoon Dong-Sik, will face MMA legend Kazushi Sakuraba in PRIDE. Even Polish gold-medalist Pawel Nastula has signed a multifight deal with PRIDE. His résumé makes him look like the judo equivalent of Rickson Gracie—and he may be the best judoka to cross over to MMA yet.

Other MMA fighters who have strong judo backgrounds include current PRIDE champ Fedor Emelianenko and UFC rising star Karo Parisyan. There are more, but the point is obvious: Judo is the one traditional martial art to thrive in MMA.

The days of the wild style-vs.-style fights are a thing of the past, but that doesn't mean MMA fighting is a closed case. Judo's return to the forefront shows that we can still be surprised and that styles and techniques we've written off can make a comeback.

Now, if we could only get some Olympic taekwondo guys into the octagon. ...

MONISTS AND PLURALISTS

August 2005

When it comes to the martial arts, I'm a pluralist. That is, I believe there are many truths and many degrees of truth. Anytime someone dismisses other arts and talks as if he's discovered the "one true way," I listen politely. However, in my heart, I feel like he's taken a little vacation from reality.

It takes a special kind of devotion to dismiss the richness and variety of our arts. To be a martial arts monist, you have to focus tightly on a narrow set of principles and techniques. You have to rationalize or minimize things that don't fit into your worldview. If that fails, you have to subsume everything under martial concepts that are so broad and general that they become meaningless. They cover everything and explain nothing.

Pluralism seems to be more in line with the reality I know. Judo, *tai chi*, *taekwondo*, *escrima* and *kyudo* have very little in common, but they're all martial arts and contain a different truth about fighting. Each one is the answer to a different problem raised by necessity and shaped by social circumstances or the technology of its time.

If all those arts contain a limited but valid truth, how can there be one true way? How can the arrows of *kyudo* somehow cancel out the throws

and submissions of judo? Some might argue that this is an unfair comparison, but I want to make a point: Sending an arrow through someone is as real as kicking him unconscious or gouging his eyes. No one would argue that judo is useless because an arrow can kill you. However, many true believers really think their kicks, eye gouges or whatever have rendered the grappling arts obsolete.

So what does a devoted monist do when he accepts that a variety of truths exists? He gathers them together and generalizes about the pesky differences until he gets some broad martial concepts. Terms are often imported from grammar or physics, but sometimes pop-science buzzwords like “flow” or “synergy” also find their way into the lexicon. It’s the kind of thing that makes some folks content that they’ve smoothed over the differences and understand the martial arts better.

The problem is, the further removed the concepts are from the techniques that gave rise to them, the more general they get. The more techniques you have to cover, the further removed and more vague your concepts become. The differences appear smoothed out only because you’re looking at them from so far away. However, when you look at the techniques up close again—or even better, when you’re forced to use them—the broad martial concepts take a back seat to the narrow strategies required to actually do a martial art.

If that’s the case, why bother with broad, all-embracing concepts at all? Why not just accept that our ideas about the fighting arts can’t get too far away from how we practice? We can generalize a bit, but having all martial arts obey the same set of rules may be too much to ask. It may simply be that the variety in the arts is natural and not a failure to discover continuity.

In fact, it may be that the martial arts have the same problem as science: Just as our arts are a collection of different truths about different things, science is a collection of knowledge that doesn’t form a coherent whole. For instance, cosmology and medicine are both sciences, but no one expects them to have much bearing on each other. The main thing all scientists seem to have in common is commitment to being reasonable. If martial artists were the same, maybe we’d discover that pluralism is the nature of reality, and the monism of the “one true way” myth could finally be put rest.

INFINITE DIVERSITY

September 2005

In last month's column, "Monists and Pluralists," I argued that variety in the martial arts is the natural state of affairs. In other words, trying to find the "one true way" or some single, unifying theory will always be thwarted by the natural variety of the martial arts. This point becomes even clearer when you survey the styles that exist in any country.

Wrestling traditions, weapons arts, and forms of foot and fistfighting coexist everywhere the martial arts have taken hold. Ancient fighting styles, modern systems and newborn combat sports all grow and decline side by side like trees in a forest. A good example comes from Japan.

Most *Black Belt* readers can rattle off Japanese examples of everything I just mentioned. Wrestling traditions? How about sumo and *jujutsu*? Weapons arts? *Kendo* and archery. Punching and kicking arts? Karate and *shorinji kempo*. However, having a general notion of what an art is doesn't do justice to the real variety you'll find once you get to know these styles better.

For example, many people think of jujutsu and weapons as mutually exclusive. But in many of the old styles, they're part of a curriculum that might also include sword and staff techniques or even more exotic stuff like using weighted chains, halberds, spears, throwing stars and ropes. While some old fighting arts are devoted to developing skill in only one weapon or in jujutsu, in other arts, weapons and empty-hand fighting blend together into a seamless whole.

The sword illustrates even more of the natural tendency toward variety. Many centuries-old sword arts of Japan still survive and continue to be passed down to the next generation. In the semiclassical sport of kendo, the sword lives on in competitive fencing matches. Then you have the less ritualized, foam-sword fighting of *chanbara*, which is like free-form kendo. Sword arts, like many other systems, run the gamut from ancient battlefield skill to modern sport.

Even if you focus exclusively on combat sports, you see a great deal of variety in Japan. There are weapons arts like *jukendo* (bayonet art) and *naginata-do* (halberd art), which follow the kendo competition model. Grappling sports are represented by native arts like sumo and judo, as well as imports like *sambo*, submission wrestling and Brazilian jiu-jitsu. There seem to be as many kinds of stand-up tournaments as there are styles of karate. The martial religion of *shorinji kempo* also has sparring tournaments. But even in sport, one fighting style spills over into another.

One of the most interesting examples is *tsomiki-ryu aikido*, which marries judo's free-sparring principles with aikido's techniques. The intriguing part is that, during matches, one competitor uses a wooden knife and the other must disarm him. This sort of blending increases the variety even in professional fighting. In addition to kickboxing and mixed martial arts, there are competitions with just about every mixture of rules you can imagine: shootboxing, in which you can pummel, throw or submit someone only while standing; and Shidokan events, in which you fight under three sets of rules (bare-knuckle karate, *muay Thai* and MMA) during the course of the match. There are even tag-team MMA matches promoted by the ZST organization.

The list of variations could go on, and it would be virtually the same for the martial arts of just about any country. Korea, China, Indonesia, Thailand, India and the Philippines also have rich martial traditions to explore. Likewise, many people who are proud of the West's martial arts heritage are bringing back that variety by reviving arts like catch wrestling and medieval fencing. In addition, new self-defense arts are being developed to meet our needs in ways that old arts can't.

Everywhere we look is a world of martial arts that's much richer and more surprising than any broad concept can express. Variety isn't just the reality of the martial arts; it's a point of view that makes them worth exploring.

CRITICS OF THE TRADITIONAL ARTS

October 2005

There's something unsettling about the harsher critics of the traditional martial arts. They're unsettling in direct proportion to how passionate they are. The harder they verbally beat down traditionalists, or the quicker they challenge them to fights, the more you catch a whiff of fascism.

Of course, there's nothing inherently fascist about arguments or physical challenges. They're natural to the martial arts and vital to learning about fighting. The spirit in which they're done is what gives them a brimstone smell. Delighting in menacing another person's integrity or challenging people you know can't defeat you isn't really about learning or teaching. It's an excuse to humiliate someone for your own enjoyment.

Arguments against the traditional arts begin to stink when they stop being civil. For instance, some people argue passionately that the traditional arts are ineffective museum pieces that should be relegated to the

dustbin of history. If you accept their belief that museums are useless and history is garbage, this will sound all right. It's the kind of argument that's meant to taunt someone into accepting a challenge match and humiliate him if he refuses. Maybe people who make these statements believe they're representing the truth or doing something good, but it's more like they're misusing some truths to satisfy their conceit.

Certainly, not every martial art must be successful in the ring or the cage. If you're not worried about making someone surrender his values or ideals, it's OK for styles that aren't just about effective technique to exist. Preserving a cultural heritage or a martial philosophy along with a semi-effective but dated fighting art doesn't seem like such a sin. These arts may continue for centuries as cultural relics, or they may soon die natural deaths. But for some people, they aren't dying quickly enough.

For them, it's not enough to belittle traditional martial artists who won't accept challenges. They literally want to beat some sense into them. They want to make them pay for investing time and money in an antique art. They want to make traditionalists suffer for embracing ideals they don't embrace. All this is done in the name of divesting people of their delusions, but the real delusion is in the mind of the guy who beats a traditional martial artist who never really had a chance in the first place. These kinds of challenge matches are not about the truth; they're an excuse for exercising righteous anger.

I call this attitude fascist because it's about intimidation and social control. If the people who want the traditional arts to disappear had their way, no art would exist that wasn't fit for sport fighting. No one would try to develop unusual ideas in the martial arts because they would be challenged early and often. The martial arts would be about only the practitioners who regularly fight and win and those who follow them. Such a scenario is as unreasonable and undesirable as any society that would allow this view of the arts to dominate.

Some might think I'm a bitter, jealous traditionalist. Nothing could be further from the truth. Even though I live in Japan, I'm not a traditional martial artist. I practice mixed martial arts and submission wrestling. I haven't worn a *gi* or done a *kata* in more than a decade. I enjoy the traditional arts the same way I enjoy museums: I'm glad they exist so I can look at them and learn from them.

I hope that one day the more fanatical sport fighters will take the righteous anger out of their evangelizing. Calm, rational arguments and a little bit of friendly sparring will get you more converts from the traditional arts than insults and challenges will. Those you can't convert to your point of

view aren't necessarily stupid, delusional or morally bankrupt. They simply practice their arts for different purposes. Recognizing that means you've gained wisdom and understanding.

REAL HUMILITY

November 2005

Humility gets a lot of lip service in the martial arts. It's a virtue we're all expected to learn and express. But like martial skills, martial virtues can be mimicked. A humble black belt who's just going through the motions can be as artificial and unconvincing as one who can't spar or defend himself.

Sometimes hollow skills and hollow virtue go hand in hand. Sometimes a guy learns all his forms, goes through the motions of fighting for years and gets a black belt. He may have never trained against a resisting opponent or had anything like a real fight, but because he's fulfilled all the requirements of his belt exams, he really believes he can fight. He secretly cherishes that belief and waves off questions about his combat experience with cryptic answers and disingenuous humility. He claims to not know anything or not be any good while flashing you a weird smile. It's as if he's enjoying a private joke instead of giving straight answers.

Other people possess real fighting skills and oversize egos to match. Their humility seems strained—as if they're trying too hard. They believe they can beat any man alive. It's this self-fulfilling belief that makes them train so hard and get so good. However, it doesn't blend with the kind of humility we like and respect in the martial arts. You end up with fighters who say all the right things, like downplaying their own skills or praising their opponents. However, their sentiments are so tight-lipped or half-hearted that we never quite believe them.

The worst, though, is when practitioners accept humility (or any martial virtue) as a kind of dogma of martial philosophy. Some adopt their art's code of ethics as if it were a religious writ and act out martial virtues without reflecting on them. This practice leads to mistaking a creepy, cultic subservience for humility. These people fawn over their instructor without ever having heard him say or seen him do anything admirable. They believe whatever senior students tell them about a technique's merit instead of trusting their own judgment. In short, they're humble only because someone told them to be.

Real humility comes naturally from life experience. It's a practical, reasonable response to superior skills or understanding. Sometimes it's a response to someone's strength of character, bravery or another powerfully demonstrated virtue. Sometimes it's just an everyday expression of morality.

For instance, the humility of a black belt who really can fight comes from his experience with actual injuries. He knows what it's like to hurt people, and he's been hurt himself. He feels humble because that's what the injuries and the lost fights have taught him.

As for fighting athletes, their egos can be proof against true humility while they're still young and strong. However, age weakens limbs and slows reflexes more quickly than it dims a man's pride. Bad beatings at the hands of younger, better opponents is the way by which many fighters learn their limits and end their careers. Even the fiercest self-confidence gets tempered by time and age.

The everyday humility of the training hall is the most natural because



PHOTO BY ROBERT W. YOUNG

Although most martial artists develop humility through experience, a few fabricate it without ever having tested their skills in competition or in real fights.

it means trusting your own judgment. You listen to an instructor, and his ideas are clear and reasonable. You watch his senior students and see that they can do something truly impressive. You feel a little bit smaller than they are—but not because of belts or codes or some sort of cultic hierarchy. It's because these people have put it all together and represent something bigger and better. They represent something you know you can become.

TAIKIKEN: FULL-CONTACT TAI CHI?

December 2005

“**T**he most important thing in the martial arts is strength.”

That wouldn't be a surprising quote if it came from a kickboxer or bare-knuckle karate fighter. The fact is, it comes from a book on internal Chinese martial arts. It's the first sentence in the introduction of *Secret Techniques of Yi Quan and Taikiken*.

The surprises don't stop there. As you read the book, you see lots of familiar postures and soft-style techniques. There's also a heavy emphasis on sparring. Moving meditation is a core concept, but the authors quickly dismiss things like mysterious powers and no-touch knockouts. What you get is a martial art that's nicely summed up by another quote: “If one wants to master the movement of *ki*, there is no shortcut but to continue primarily training one's internal strength and to accumulate lots of real combat training.”

So what is this soft style with hard sparring? Is it really full-contact *tai chi*? Armed with a little knowledge and a lot of questions, I headed off one evening to meet one of *taikiken*'s leading masters, Michio Shimada.

At the time, he taught students a couple of nights a week in Tokyo's Shinjuku Central Park. Although it was around 9:30 p.m. when I arrived, the park was alive with activity. Among all the other visitors, a bunch of guys on a tennis court were standing perfectly still with their arms extended. It was the *taikiken* group.

I later found out that they were doing *ritsuzen*, which is the heart of *yi quan* and *taikiken* practice. Both a warm-up and a form of standing meditation, it encourages practitioners to focus their concentration and find the body's natural balance between muscular tension and relaxation. Everyone carries on at his own pace until the movement is finished.

Some students came over and talked with me while we waited for Shi-

mada to arrive. The first thing I learned was that taikiken isn't a species of *tai chi chuan*. While the names of the two arts are similar, they spring from different sources: Taikiken descends from yi quan, which emphasizes internal principles over complex forms, and yi quan is an outgrowth of *hs-ing-i chuan* (also spelled *xing yi quan*). Taikiken's founder, Kenichi Sawai, studied yi quan in China and brought it to Japan. He modified the style he learned, incorporating principles from Japanese martial arts, and named his art "taikiken." Shimada was one of his top students.

Next, the students described what the classes were like. They said each session starts with the standing meditation I saw when I arrived. Then they do slow movements. Gradually, they speed things up and eventually do two-person drills. The goal of practice is to maintain the balanced, focused state achieved in ritsuzen, going from slow drills to quick, relaxed fighting techniques.

When Shimada arrived, he greeted me with a broad smile and a firm handshake. He was tall, with longish hair and baggy trousers. He had thick, meaty hands and looked young for his age. After some semiformal introductions and my asking again if it was OK to watch the class, the master went to check out his students one at a time.

At first, Shimada appeared uncomfortable with my presence. However, after 20 minutes, he returned and seemed eager to talk about the art. He reiterated the basic themes his students had told me, adding, "Inner styles are the hardest. Outer styles look harder, but the inner ones are more explosive."

That led straight to questions about the ki in taikiken. What is it and how does it differ from other martial arts' concepts of ki? "Ki is natural movement-instinct," Shimada explained. "Taikiken is about beating an opponent and beating a disease through natural movement, focusing the whole body as one muscle.

"It's not about standing and trading punches; it's about throwing techniques with inner energy and using motions to cut down on wasted movement."

That sounded reasonable, but it also sounded like the principles of several internal arts. When I asked why other internal stylists don't emphasize sparring the way he does, he looked as if the answer was obvious. "They don't because they don't know how," he said, matter-of-factly. "All the styles are the same if you develop inner power. Sparring is just checking your inner power."

After demonstrating some sparring techniques with one of his advanced

students, Shimada tutored the others. I went over my notes and waited for him to finish. The thing that stood out in my mind was that he was a karate champion before taking up taikiken. He said he was an instant convert to the art after Sawai smacked him down in a match, which caused him to devote nearly 25 years of his life to it.

When Shimada finally returned, it was almost the end of the training session. I thanked him for letting me watch and promised to return, but I had one more question. I wanted to know about his plans for the future of taikiken. He said he was focusing on passing the art on to others the way it had been to him. While he wasn't interested in popularizing it, he qualified that by saying, "We practice with other people from around the world, and sparring is like a greeting." So if you're into internal martial arts, stop by and say hello. Just remember to bring some headgear.

CYNICISM

January 2006

Sometimes it seems like cynicism is the collective neurosis of our time. It's as if everything we do must be reduced to base cravings for anything to make sense. Money, power, status and sex are the only motives that count. We see beliefs as useful lies, things to massage people's feelings and get what we want from them. Otherwise, we consider such ideals harmless idiosyncrasies or cultural ornaments—fairy tales nurtured by people who are too weak or stupid to deal with the cold, hard truths of life.

This kind of cynicism may be an occupational hazard in some areas, like politics or show business. However, it doesn't have to be everyone's default setting, least of all in the martial arts community. All of us are, to some extent, in the business of self-discovery and idealism. In fact, one of the main reasons the arts endure is they show a truth in fighting that's not hard and cold.

In spite of this, many martial artists descend into cynicism. I'm not just talking about the owners of belt factories that charge high rates for classes and distribute rank certificates like confetti. Some of the biggest cynics are famous and influential practitioners.

Over the years, I've been fortunate enough to meet heads of styles, top fighters and other big names in the industry. I generally have an automatic admiration for them because of the things they've achieved. I usually assume they're pleased with themselves, too. Consequently, I'm always sur-

prised by how many complain that they've wasted their time and should've become lawyers or doctors, or how many talk constantly about making money or moving merchandise. Most of all, I'm amazed by champion fighters—men who've accomplished something real in the ring—who covet the hollow glamour of Hollywood.

To be fair, many well-known martial artists do try to live up to a kind of warrior ideal. Guys like Pat Miletich and Yuki Nakai spring to mind. They make money off the fighting arts and enjoy a certain level of fame, but you can't reduce them to it. The honesty and excellence of such fighters put cynicism in its place. Being a modern-day warrior is what they're about, regardless of fight purses or fame.

This spark of idealism, the notion that people can be more than what they are, gives meaning to the martial arts. Every day in the practice hall, we have a chance to shape ourselves according to an ideal and make it come alive through our actions. Every time we step in the ring, we have a chance to test the character we've developed, to see whether we've really become more than we were. It's only when we give up on our ideals and guiding principles that the arts seem meaningless and we fall back to the default setting of cynicism. It's only then that we sour on the martial arts and start asking, "What is this getting me?"

What the martial arts "get" us is the chance to bring an ideal to life through our fighting skill. Each of us makes the arts as meaningful or meaningless as we want through our attitude. We can make our art something noble and strong that's the center of our life, or it could be a two-bit hustle in which we talk like a fortune cookie and relieve people of their money. The choice is ours.

MARTIAL ARTS IDEALISM

February 2006

When people compare martial arts, they quickly come up against a standard argument: "It's not the art, it's the individual."

What they usually mean is that any well-conditioned or gifted athlete will win his fights regardless of what style he uses. Seeing a kickboxer like Mirko Filipovic and a pro wrestler like Kazushi Sakuraba succeed in mixed-martial arts tournaments makes you think there's some truth to this. But if the old saying is true and the art isn't important, what does it mean for the rest of us who aren't hyper-talented?

It means you're in the hot seat. If you think the individual is more important than the art, you're not deflecting criticism of your art. You're inviting scrutiny as a representative of that art. Regardless of your level of talent, the success or failure of your style now depends solely on you.

It gets even more difficult if you're the idealistic type. You can't take refuge in the fact that an art exists perfectly in your mind whether or not you succeed at it. It's not good enough that someone, somewhere, at some point in history was beating all comers with your style. You can't live vicariously through another person's reputation. You have to show that your art has value by doing it well and convincing others of its worth with your ability.

That doesn't mean you have to issue an open challenge to take on all comers, but you must be able to do the stuff you describe. If you're an *aikido* practitioner and you talk about wrist-grab escapes, you should be able to extricate your hand whenever someone does one to you. If you tell people about angling away and redirecting haymakers into wrist locks, you'd better be good enough to do it on an untrained guy. You don't have to show that you're superior to other martial artists, but you must show that someone right here, right now, can deliver on your art's promises. You need to be the one who makes the art worthwhile.

Some will protest that their techniques are too deadly or too precious to show the public. However, these same tired objections don't change things if you argue that the practitioner is more important than the style. The onus is still on the individual to somehow demonstrate—preferably without putting on a spoon-bending magic show—that he can do something his martial art promises. Otherwise, his art is represented by nothing but the objections mentioned above.

The truth is, people in all arts step up and represent this theme in various ways. Plenty of kickboxers and MMA guys are making a living showing us their mastery of their arts, but some compete just because they believe in their system and want to be as good at it as they can. Others fight full contact in bare-knuckle karate events and *sanshou* matches. Still others enter grappling competitions under judo, *jiu-jitsu*, *sambo* or submission-wrestling rules. Even practitioners of soft arts have ways of showing mastery of their preferred skills. For example, aikido has the Tomiki-rules tournaments, which look like judo competitions with one guy using a wooden knife, and *tai chi* has push-hands events.

Of course, competition isn't everything. None of those events sums up everything a martial art is about. What they do is give people a chance to

test some representative skills from their art and be that individual who can show what the art is worth.

I'm not sure whether it's true that a person is more important than the style he practices, but it's a perspective I like to promote. Asking someone to be responsible for his art's reputation brings out the best in him. It tells him that being a martial artist means doing something exceedingly well instead of coasting on his art's reputation. It means being your art instead of just talking about it.

WE'RE THE BAD GUYS?

March 2006

"Any majesty [boxing] has is gone. It's just above Ultimate Fighting."

—Lou DiBella

People have been despairing over boxing's decline for years. Often they mean a decline in popularity and quality of fighters, especially in the heavyweight division. Of course, there are constant accusations of shady business dealings and exploitation, too. But what really worries people like boxing promoter Lou DiBella is the social standing of the sport. They're worried about becoming lowlifes—like us.

It may be hard to believe, but many people think boxing is somehow different from the martial arts. They really think it's better or nobler than any other kind of fighting. To them, we're the bad guys. Those of us who are into the mixed martial arts are thugs and dead-enders who don't understand truly civilized, masculine ideals.

Of course, MMA shocked everyone until the world got used to it. But kickboxing has a good rep among boxers, right? Not necessarily. In the 1970s and '80s, a lot of kickboxers were dismissed as second-rate fighters who couldn't make it in boxing. In recent years, when Mike Tyson was making noise about wanting to fight in K-1, World Boxing Commission President Jose Sulaiman publicly pleaded with him not to "participate in the denigrating, legalized savagery of K-1." Sulaiman went on to characterize the Japanese kickboxing organization as holding events "for those who have nothing left at all or for amateurs or cheap street fighters."

You can argue with people who really believe this kind of stuff, but it won't change a whole lot of minds. It doesn't matter that there have been

many more fatalities in boxing than in MMA. It doesn't matter that K-1 competitors fight fewer rounds per match than do top boxers and so absorb far fewer blows. Forget rational argument. What matters to them is that we're doing things that clash with their sense of what's civilized. Choking someone or kicking him in the legs just seems wrong to them.

Problem is, people who don't follow combat sports don't make these kinds of distinctions. It all looks wrong to them. There's no more majesty in two fighters punching above the waist than there is in any other kind of fighting. They're all dangerous, and they're all about winning by hurting the opponent. Indeed, to the average person, there's nothing elevated about fighting.

It's hard to begrudge boxers their sense of self-importance, though. Anyone who dedicates a large part of his life to a fighting art has to believe it's something special. But the truth is that no matter what boxing's social status is, it's not so different that its proponents can look down on MMA and kickboxing. A ground-and-pound victory may look like a mugging and a kick that breaks a leg may be stomach-turning, but it's worth remembering that one man's cheap trick is another man's noble skill.

MARTIAL ARTS IN THE 22ND CENTURY

April 2006

When people speak about the future of the martial arts, they're usually talking about the short term. Sometimes they get excited about a budding trend and declare, "This is the future." Other times, it's just speculation about how the arts will change within our lifetimes, like forecasting how shifting attitudes and needs might alter our fighting skills. However, it's rare that anyone talks about the distant future. What will the martial arts be like a century or two from now?

Of course, predicting the future of any field is a risky business. People of my grandfather's era believed we'd be riding around in hover cars and eating food in pill form by now. There were also some big things they never saw coming, like the Internet. So what can we say about the future of the martial arts that won't sound ridiculous or be dead wrong 100 years from now?

The safest thing to say is that things will likely continue as they are. The arts will continue to be hobbies, sports or quasi-religious rituals for most people. They'll also continue to be essential training for some, like

police and soldiers. If the world changes significantly, the martial arts will follow suit. Things could get a lot worse, and the arts would become necessary for survival, or they could get a lot better, and fighting skills would become unnecessary.

It's hard to imagine a future so bad that empty-hand fighting or weapons skills would become necessary again. It sounds like the plot of some cheap, post-apocalyptic sci-fi flick. However, there are reasons to worry about that kind of future, including the end of cheap oil and a subsequent population crash.

If the doomsayers are right, we're living at or near the high-tide mark of modern civilization. At some point during our lifetimes, the oil that powers nearly all our transportation will become scarce, and our ability to produce and distribute food and goods will decline severely. Economies will collapse, people will starve, populations will shrink and society will revert to a medieval agricultural state. No nuclear apocalypse is needed. Civilization will wind down because it ran out of gas.

For martial artists, this future looks a lot like the past. There would be fewer guns, and they would be expensive. There would also be less law enforcement because police and soldiers could protect only small areas without the aid of gas-powered vehicles. People would have to rely on the safety of numbers, and they would have to know how to defend themselves with weapons or their bare hands. In other words, they would have to be like the traditional martial artists who often get dismissed as useless in our time.

Likewise, all those regularly ridiculed attitudes and practices of traditional martial artists would return. Groups living in such a world would have a clannish sense of loyalty, and those with martial arts knowledge would jealously guard their fighting secrets because they had to. They couldn't afford a free exchange of information or to trust too easily. To those living in that possible future, it would be the fighting sports and martial hobbies of our time that would look ridiculous, like unnecessary indulgences.

What happens if we go in the other direction and successfully transition from our fossil-fuel economy to some better, more sustainable energy-based economy? What if technology continues to advance and we gain even more mastery over nature? What will the martial arts look like in that future? Again, I think those citizens will remind us of the past—but this future will be the fulfillment of the dreams of the 19th century.

The only way the martial arts will change fundamentally is if human nature changes. That is, if we gain enough mastery over our own biology to make ourselves less violent. This may sound like a fantasy future, but

just six years ago, scientists mapped the human genome for the first time. Because of the steady progress made in understanding our own makeup, some researchers see a future in which we can retool ourselves to be better in every sense of the word.

With power over our biology, we could make society into a place with little physical conflict, and in that environment, all martial arts would become exercises in self-discipline and physical expression. They would reflect the real change in human nature that 19th-century idealists aimed for. Like the transition of the *-jutsu* war arts of Japan to *-do* suffixed ways of life, all martial systems would be decommissioned and kept only as cultural artifacts.

These are just a couple of the possible futures of the martial arts. They're things that could happen if life gets a lot better or a lot worse than expected. However, chances are, the future will be a lot like the present, and groups of people around the world will still practice and pass on their martial legacies. The arts will slowly redefine themselves and their purposes, and we'll all become forgotten names on crumbling tombstones. But most of all, the arts will still be there, and as long as they survive, so will a little bit of us.

TILTING AT WINDMILLS

May 2006

Reading a great book is a difficult pleasure. It makes you want to keep reading, but it resists easy understanding. And it makes you think and feel a lot more than a disposable page turner does. Sometimes it's funny or inspiring. Other times, it makes you uncomfortable or angry. Regardless of where it takes you, it teaches you something about yourself.

A lot of literature speaks to martial artists in this way—warrior epics, journeys of mystical discovery and semilegendary biographies. The ones that martial artists usually consider great reflect the way we'd like to see ourselves: heroic and ambiguously moral. For example, in the *Ramayana*, the hero, Rama, is supposed to be a paragon of virtue, yet he uses his superhuman archery skills to assassinate an enemy. Similarly, tales of Homer's heroes or fictional accounts of Miyamoto Musashi's life contain enough of our ideals to keep us interested but enough of the unruly truth of human nature to ring true.

But not all the great books that speak to martial artists follow this

pattern. In fact, the one that probably speaks to us the most is a comedy of heroic idealism: Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. It's a 400-year-old story that's funny, wise and uncomfortably familiar to any longtime martial artist. The hero, Don Quixote, is a man who reads too many books about the adventures of knights in shining armor. Eventually he overdoses on chivalry, loses his mind and decides to become a knight. Quixote dons some antique armor and wanders the countryside trying to perform heroic deeds like those chronicled in his medieval romances. What follows is a series of comic adventures in which his obsession gets him hurt and generally makes a mess of things.

It doesn't take much effort to see shades of Don Quixote in the contemporary martial arts. A lot of us were inspired to take up the old Asian styles after watching kung fu movies. A lot of us also really want a taste of that martial romanticism in our lives. For some, the attraction of martial arts heroism overwhelms good sense.

We've all met—or maybe even been—martial artists who go a little batty, treat their uniform like a superhero's costume and perform *kata* like they were casting a spell. That feeling sometimes spills over into life outside the training hall, and they get themselves in fights with B-movie motives. They find themselves defending someone's honor or think that circumstances forced them to put aside humility and display their superpowers. Then they usually get beat up, don't help anyone and, like the comic Spanish knight, reinterpret their failure so it somehow makes sense in their heroic narrative.

This assessment may seem unfair, but there really are martial arts Don Quixotes out there. My first karate instructor liked to tell the story of a local guy who was so into the *Kung Fu* TV series that he got tiger and dragon tattoos on his forearms like the show's main character. Just before he got into a fight, he'd make everyone wait while he rolled up his sleeves. Then he'd slowly and dramatically raise his arms as if he was signaling a touchdown, try to awe his opponent with his fake Shaolin ink, charge in and almost invariably get a beatdown.

Given this description, *Don Quixote* is more than just a cautionary tale about letting your imagination get the best of you. Like all great books, it resists easy interpretation and offers more to a martial artist than a tragicomic view of himself. It tells about the value of individualism and vision, even when it seems unrealistic. It also makes us feel sympathy for the mad knight and question whether the world should be more like our ideal vision instead of accepting it as we find it.

The most famous scene in *Don Quixote* is the one in which he mistakes a windmill for an evil giant. Like a good hero, he tilts his lance toward the windmill and charges. That's where the expression "tilting at windmills" comes from. It usually means "attacking imaginary enemies," but it also refers to being carried away by one's ideals. If a great book like *Don Quixote* teaches us anything about ourselves, it's the value of living our ideals without becoming a joke.

THE CORE SIGNIFICANCE

June 2006

For many people, exercise is an end in itself. They may cite reasons like wanting to stay healthy or having a benign addiction to the way exercise makes them feel, but that's as far as it goes. For them, doing something physical is just a daily chore or a daily fix.

Other people need more. Wanting greater mental challenges in their exercise, they take up a sport and work out the maze of what's possible within its rules. It doesn't matter whether it's rugby or curling: Sports make exercise a joy for them because overcoming the random possibilities of a game is far more engaging than plodding along on a treadmill. Still, for many people this isn't enough. Maintaining good health, getting an endorphin rush and conquering the mental challenge of sports just don't do it. They look for a deeper sense of meaning through movement, and a lot of them end up in the martial arts.

You can derive a deep sense of meaning from many activities. Usually it comes from studying the fine arts, learning philosophy or practicing a religion. But how does something closer to exercise than exegesis provide answers to the big questions? What core significance do we find in the martial arts?

The answer I usually give is that it's the danger inherent in fighting that makes the difference. Danger requires any decent human being to make moral and practical choices. He must decide when it's right to fight and why. These choices—along with the technology and social mores within which the practitioner lives—then shape the arts he practices. It's a clear answer with a kind of logic, but it always leaves me feeling that I've said a whole lot about nothing.

Of course, dealing with danger or mortality in any way gives most things a heightened sense of meaning. However, any formula for what comes next

feels empty compared to actually doing a fighting art. It's closer to the truth to say that unlike the monotony of jogging or strategizing how to win a game, the martial arts are about exercising our humanity. Unlike pure mental and physical exercises, we can explore human nature through the practice of our fighting art.

It may seem strange to think of the martial arts as a kind of humanity, but it's not a new idea. Honestly expressing some core idea of "self" is what *jeet kune do* is all about. In fact, you could argue that's

what all martial arts became once they were transformed into arts. They became more than just an opportunity to learn morality; they became a way to express much of our nature through the skills of fighting.

What do we get to express? Obviously, anger. Hopefully, restraint and mercy. But there's more to it than that. Everyone living the story of his life through the martial arts plays out these emotions like a character in his personal drama. There are antagonists to confront and conflicts to resolve. There's jealousy, joy, fear and friendship developing along the arc of your life. Although the twists and turns are unique, they all contain the same elements of personal struggle, moral paradox and mystical exploration that define the martial arts.



PHOTO BY RICK HUSTAD

The danger inherent in fighting makes martial arts practice different from other sports and forms of exercise. (For illustrative purposes, Diego Sanchez is shown.)

The fighting arts are physical activities. They're forms of exercise, and we need the pure mechanics of fitness and strategy to express anything through fighting. What makes them different is that those components are means to an end, not ends themselves. Whether we fight in the training hall, in competition or in self-defense, we're making a statement about what it means to be human.

MERE MORTALS

July 2006

"It's a strange phenomena in boxing, but once that final bell rings, any hatred that boxers might feel for one another is instantly replaced by a certain respect and brotherhood, and that's why we hug each other after trying to knock each other's block off. Make sense to you? It hardly makes sense to me, but there you have it."

—Ken Norton, heavyweight champion, 1978
from *Going the Distance*

When martial artists talk disparagingly about combat athletes, you have to wonder whether they've ever met one. A lot of students in traditional, noncompetitive arts seem to think that fighters come in only two flavors: insanely competitive steroid addicts and violent thugs exploiting a loophole in the rules of civilization. But the reality of fighting is more like what's described in Ken Norton's quote. Fighters are generally decent guys who can be friends even after they try to break each other's face.

Traditional martial artists can be forgiven for getting it wrong. Good will arising from a good pummeling seems like a contradiction, and lots of people have trouble wrapping their heads around the idea. Even great fighters like Norton—people who've lived with the paradox—are at a loss to explain it. But the more you learn about fighters and fight sports, the less fevered your imagination gets.

First, steroid abuse is a genuine concern in the fight sports. However, lots of martial artists are way too quick to assume all well-muscled fighters use them. Just because a guy is in good shape doesn't necessarily mean it's because of performance-enhancing drugs. Good fighters go through cardio and weight-training routines that are an order of magnitude above the basic workouts offered at most martial arts schools. So it might seem like they're all on steroids, but only a few have been caught using them.

In fact, assuming all successful fighters are trans-human products of advanced chemistry is a form of unspoken jealousy. The rationale is, if only steroid abusers can get big and strong and fight well, a mediocre martial artist can forgive himself for not getting in good shape. Plus, he can feel morally superior because he doesn't take drugs. Assuming all good fighters are on steroids is an easy way for him to write off his own shortcomings and take the moral high ground.

Second, there are some criminals and thugs in the fight sports. Examples are all too easy to find because negative stories about fighters fit our expectations. Reports range from drunken temper tantrums to outright murder. A recent incident involved a boxer and middleweight contender named James "The Harlem Hammer" Butler, who was sentenced to 29 years in prison for killing sportswriter Sam Kellerman. The truth, however, is that these men and their criminal behavior don't define the fight sports.

Evidence in support of that claim comes from Swedish researchers Y. Haglund and E. Eriksson, who conducted a study of amateur boxers in 1993. Their results seem to indicate that fighters are better-than-average citizens compared with soccer players and track-and-field athletes. In addition to uncovering no significant neurological differences, they found that



PHOTO BY ROBERT W. YOUNG

Martial artists who've never competed often fail to comprehend how two fighters can declare war on each other in the ring, then be friends once their match is over.

boxers were “less impulsive and more socialized” than the other athletes. In other words, they’re generally a little more patient and friendly than the average guy.

What is it about sport fighting that fosters friendship instead of hate? Judging from my own brief stint in the ring, I’d say it’s the experience of going through a shared ordeal. You play by the rules and have a fair fight, and at the end, both of you are still standing. At that point, you feel an enormous sense of relief and good will because, in an odd way, you faced your fears and braved dangers together.

Many martial artists choose not to compete because they’re content with training, getting fit and staying close to their art’s ideals. But if you want to understand the strange sense of respect and brotherhood that fighters feel for each other, the best way is to try it yourself. The afterglow of one good fight is worth more than 1,000 homilies on respect in the martial arts.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

August 2006

Great martial artists and legendary training halls have a kind of magic about them, drawing in people from all walks of life who study the arts for a variety of reasons. Those who seek out the best in the martial arts have one thing in common: They all hope some of the magic will rub off.

That seems reasonable. The best people to show you how to be great are those who’ve done great things, right? Like most things in life, it’s not that simple. Sure, you can acquire some serious skill and a deep knowledge of a style by training at its best *dojo*. However, you’ll find out pretty quickly when you get involved with greats and legends that there are more detours and frustrations than there are shortcuts.

The first difficulty you may run into is that excellence in doing the martial arts doesn’t automatically lead to excellence in teaching them.

Excellence isn’t a personality trait. It isn’t a general quality that comes out in everything a person does. Rather, genius is often confined to one field. Martial artists who are brilliant in one style often struggle in others. Still, if a person is truly great at something, he understands it more completely and deeply than his peers. Does that mean he’s the best person to learn from? Not necessarily. Teaching is a skill, too—one that’s often at odds with developing a real genius for fighting.

Anyone who develops his ability to a high level is necessarily a little

self-centered. He's always improving himself and thinking about his progress. Once a martial artist reaches that level, he must constantly focus on maintaining his health and the outstanding skills he's developed.

Good *sensei* are different. Their job is to discover your native talents and develop them. However, after spending years focusing on themselves, some high-level fighters and martial artists can't dial down their expectations and truly understand less-gifted athletes. Often, it's the individuals with more patience and better teaching skills who make better instructors.

The second difficulty is that learning is a lot more active and adversarial in high-level gyms than most people expect.

Many students come to the martial arts with the idea that they're empty vessels into which a great master will pour knowledge. But learning isn't about waiting to be given information or insight. It's about actively figuring something out under the guidance of an expert. That's especially true when you train under a great martial artist who possesses minimal teaching skill. He may have the knowledge, but you must actively experiment and ask questions to get the answers you want. But often, even that isn't enough.

The martial arts ideal is for each practitioner to become the perfect marriage of knowledge and fighting skill. High-level gyms have a community of people who are committed to achieving the same goals. That means you'll have to rise to the level of the people

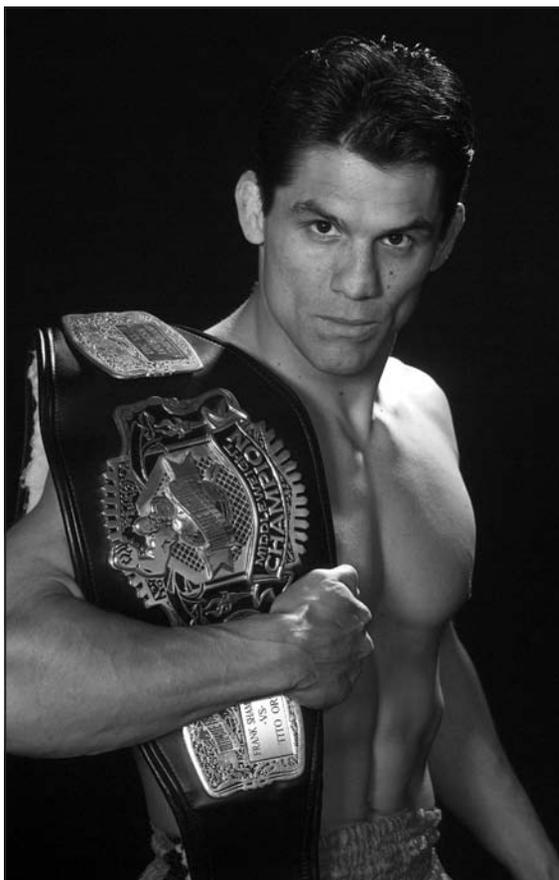


PHOTO BY ROCK HUSTEAD

Not all great fighters are great teachers. However, a few, such as mixed-martial arts champ Frank Shamrock, are renowned for their skills in both endeavors.

around you. You'll have to learn more than you're taught while staying in great shape so you can keep up. You'll have to struggle constantly in practice with other ambitious students who are also getting better.

Third, martial arts mojo is nontransferable. That is, not much magic rubs off. No matter how hard you try or how closely you study him, you'll never be the same as the great fighter you try to emulate.

In a fighting art, learning isn't just mastering a set of skills that can be used successfully by anyone. It's also discovering things about yourself. As you practice and push the boundaries of physical fitness, you discover your own strengths and limitations. For example, some people who go to top mixed-martial arts gyms to become better grapplers accidentally discover that they're talented stand-up fighters.

What's more, people can excel only at something that's consistent with their personality. You could go to a top boxing gym to learn how to systematically beat someone down with your fists, but if you can't handle the idea of pounding on another man's face for 12 rounds, you'll never be successful at it.

In the end, great training halls and great martial artists are as ideal as they are real. They're beacons of perfection that compel us to be better. They bring out the best that's already in us, instead of just depositing wisdom and information. Through them, we discover ourselves and define our talents.

THE TIME OF YOUR LIFE

September 2006

The martial arts go through phases and fads just like anything else. Right now, they're leaning toward pragmatism. People are showing more interest in solving the practical problems of sport fighting or self-defense and less interest in Zen riddles or warrior mysticism.

In fact, mysticism has become almost a dirty word, a synonym for obfuscation and hucksterism. The attention that was once paid to phantom energies and death touches is fading. Testable techniques and clear, consistent ideas are in, and that can only be a good thing. As some empty ideas wither, other mystical notions may find firm ground to stand on. In particular, seemingly empty superstitions about shifts in consciousness may prove to be something real and valuable.

The main reason for believing this is, our perception of time can change.

It can be changed by something as little as meditation or something as big as a life-threatening accident. The common denominator is that, in both cases, time seems to slow down. Whether attention is purposely focused or forced to focus by danger, the brain takes in more and does so more quickly than it normally would. The quick, detail-rich perception has the effect of making the action seem slower.

The rub here is that you're not psychic in these moments of heightened awareness, even though it may feel like it. What you're doing is seeing the present moment much better than you normally do. This is the same kind of practical benefit swordsmen used to seek in Zen monasteries. It's similar to "the zone" that professional athletes try to attain.

Combine that with knowing the attacks and counters of fighting, and you've got someone who's as close to being psychic as a person can be. You've got someone who's taking things in at a faster rate, seeing things unfold at a slower rate, guessing extremely well about what his opponent is going to do, and then easily beating him to the punch—or kick or throw



PHOTO BY ROBERT W. YOUNG

These days, interest in mysticism and monastic martial arts is being supplanted by an obsession with what works in the ring and on the street.

or whatever. In other words, you have the ideal martial artist.

One of the real sticking points, though, is that a lot of arts just seem to assume this experience of time dilation. Whenever I see a demonstration in which an attacker throws a single punch or kick and receives 10 in return, I see a re-enactment of time slowing down. The participants are behaving as though they were counting on falling into a state of heightened awareness, a state in which attackers seem predictable and slow. But while our sense of time can be flexible, that state isn't necessarily reliable. Those perfect moments when you can see everything coming and react perfectly are rare for the average person.

Nevertheless, such moments are worth preparing for. Through meditation, the trancelike state of total exhaustion, or even the bracing fear that stems from trading punches in the ring, you might get more than the practical benefit of having time slow down. You may even have an experience in which the distinct shape you've given time dissolves. What's left is hard to describe.

Sometimes the simplest answer is the best. It's often much simpler and, sadly, more accurate to assume that anyone embracing mysticism in the martial arts is a crank or a charlatan. But things get tricky when you get down to the nuts and bolts of experience. When you read accounts of people talking about shifts in awareness, is it simpler to just assume that they're kidding themselves or that there's something worth sussing out? In the case of time standing still for us, there may be more than simple answers.

THE TRUTH AROUND THE EDGES

October 2006

Using the combat sports as proof of what does and doesn't work really gets some martial artists bent out of shape. It provokes immediate and predictable protests from nonsport martial artists. They've included comments about how the rules of the fighting sports limit what you can do and how artificial it is to dismiss eye pokes, groin strikes, weapons and so on. But these complaints seem anemic compared to the wordless truth of one man beating another in the ring.

That's a shame, too. Nonsport martial artists really do have a point about the limitations of sport fighting. The rules really do bias you toward using certain techniques and ignoring others. But instead of dismissing all fight sports as totally artificial creations, nonsport martial artists should

acknowledge the power of their examples and embrace them. There's nothing that supports traditional and modern self-defense ideas better than what happens around the edges of the rules.

First, attacks to the eyes and groin are illegal in every legitimate form of sport fighting, but that doesn't mean they don't happen. Boxers and mixed martial artists often sustain injuries from accidental eye gouges and scrapes. The most serious of these occurred when Vitor Belfort accidentally sliced open Randy Couture's eyelid in an Ultimate Fighting Championship title match. The bout was stopped before the first minute of the first round had finished because the tear seriously impaired Couture's ability to compete. So someone deliberately trying to do what Belfort did by accident can't be dismissed.

As for accidental groin shots, they provide even better support for non-sport martial artists. Sure, we've all sustained the occasional low blow in practice, and we generally recover quickly. But when a professional athlete accidentally blasts another in the groin, it's usually a fight ender. The most infamous example of this occurred when Pancrase veteran Akihiro Gono got kicked in the crotch by Chute Boxe's Nilson de Castro. In the aftermath, Gono was vomiting and unable to stand. When I went backstage an hour later, the Japanese fighter was being wheeled out of the building on a stretcher.

Second, there are lots of fringe techniques that only occasionally succeed in sport matches, but those successes hint at what's possible when there are no rules. They include standing submissions and kicking downed opponents.

Standing submissions are a big part of many traditional arts, but MMA athletes dismiss them as low-percentage techniques and usually don't even try for them. The main exception is the standing guillotine choke. However, there are times when you'll see combatants pull off other ones.

In early 2005, *jujutsu* standout Shinya Aoki met Keith Wisniewski in a Shooto match. Halfway through the first round, the two were clinched against the ropes. Aoki suddenly spun out and into a *waki-gatame* hold that snapped Wisniewski's elbow. It was similar to the joint-breaking techniques in lots of stand-up arts, only this time it was a real broken arm against a real resisting opponent.

As for kicks to guys who are down, that's been part of *kenpo* for a long time. But it's only when MMA guys are allowed to kick a downed opponent that we see proof that it's a viable finishing technique. In fact, Chute Boxe's current champion, Mauricio "Shogun" Rua, made it his calling card for a while. His victory over Hiromitsu Kanehara was a lesson in how to beat a



PHOTOS BY ROBERT W. YOUNG

Kicking a downed opponent is taught in numerous self-defense systems, and mixed-martial arts matches have proved its effectiveness.

ground fighter using kicks and stomps.

These are only a few examples of how sport fighting actually supports some notions of nonsport martial artists. Traditionalists and self-defense practitioners have more to gain from engaging with sport fighters and learning what sport-fighting accidents and fringe-sport techniques can tell them about their own methods. But mostly it'll just give them a chance to put away the weak arguments and display some real knowledge of the sport.

MYTHS KEEP THE TRUTH ALIVE

November 2006

There are stories we've all told ourselves about the martial arts. The usual suspects are tales of martial pilgrimages, legendary warriors defeating all challengers, special insights achieved through meditation and harsh trials, and so on. One theme that occurs regularly is that of progress overcoming mindless tradition.

One example of this is the story of Brazilian *jiu-jitsu's* origins. A Japanese immigrant teaches a few Brazilians some old-school judo or jujutsu. They train like crazy, fight a lot and develop a superior style based on those experiences. The genius responsible for molding hopeless Japanese jujutsu into a stellar Brazilian ground-fighting art depends on the lineage of the storyteller, but the plot is generally the same: The martial arts were useless self-deception until Brazilian jiu-jitsu was invented.

Another example is the story of benighted traditionalists as told by *jeet kune do* followers. Practitioners in the past, so it goes, discovered vital truths about hand-to-hand combat that eventually ossified into dogmatic truths. Then suddenly in the 1960s and '70s, a generation of martial artists, inspired by Bruce Lee's ideas, began challenging these dogmas and freeing up good techniques from the needless restrictions of tradition.

Like all good stories, these episodes contain more than a little truth. Brazilian jiu-jitsu really has been a revolution in the martial arts, and Lee's ideas did inspire a great deal of creativity and experimentation in the contemporary arts. Despite having a basis in truth, these stories function more like foundation myths than solid reportage. While they include real facts and dramatize a point of view, even a cursory review of history shows that the big picture is more complicated than these stories paint it.

First, Japanese jujutsu has a long history that many Brazilian jiu-jitsu stylists neither know nor care about. The wrist



PHOTO BY RICK HUSTEAD

Great changes occurred in the Japanese martial arts once swords were no longer carried. Many styles of jujutsu designed to fend off blade attacks were altered to focus on empty-hand techniques.

locks and throws that ground-fighting guys easily dismiss make a lot more sense in a sword-wielding culture. What's more, ground fighting was always part of jujutsu. Sometimes that meant grappling in samurai armor. Sometimes it meant restraining a kneeling person as he tried to stand, draw a sword and start slashing people.

Second, jujutsu changed when swords disappeared. It became more like what we see today. While some styles retained their blade and armor techniques, others developed a strong ground-fighting repertoire that fit the new social reality. Still others were absorbed into judo's growing ground-fighting syllabus. In other words, ground fighting wasn't just waiting around to be discovered by Brazilians; it was being actively developed and used throughout jujutsu's history. What happened to jujutsu in Brazil is the same thing that's been happening to it for centuries. Talented people change what they do to suit their needs and their times.

As for the liberating power of Lee's ideas, a lot of us who started training in his wake felt it. Although Lee didn't invent freedom and vitality in the fighting arts, he emphasized the way arts die on the vine and how they renew themselves. Re-evaluating and reinterpreting the martial arts is a continuing process. It's been a responsibility of jujutsu masters throughout the centuries. It's what Lee did by transforming a modified *wing chun* into the hyper-eclectic jeet kune do, and it's exactly what the current generation of cross-training mixed martial artists is doing.

Lee was probably the best spokesman of his generation for the idea of keeping life and purpose in the martial arts, but the cycle of arts maturing, growing stale and needing change was recognized long before he was born. It will continue long after jeet kune do meets the same fate, if it hasn't already. Barely one generation after Lee became the prophet of a new age in martial arts freedom, mixed martial artists—the freest practitioners there are—rarely cite him as an influence. The new generation is already finding its own voice and its own idols.

The stories we tell each other aren't necessarily bad. Like I said before, they do contain more than a little truth. But, like most stories, they're simplified to improve the telling. That simplicity makes them easy to hold onto when someone wants easy answers to hard questions. But simple stories are much smaller than the broad, complex history of the martial arts. And we're only as big as the stories we live.

QUESTIONING AUTHORITY

December 2006

A martial arts instructor is usually treated like an authority. It's almost an article of faith that if someone has a black belt or its equivalent, he's above you. His thoughts and opinions about fighting and a host of related issues are special. We approach him with confused notions, and he straightens us out with clear answers and good training. But what happens when things don't work out this way? What happens when it's time to question authority?

The answers to those questions vary depending on the instructor and the martial art, but one general rule seems to apply: The more traditional the art, the less its leaders and practitioners are interested in justifying their authority. You train their way, or you give up and go somewhere else. Questions are considered a product of ignorance and impatience. It's assumed that if you wait long enough, train hard enough and quietly reflect on the reasons behind traditional methods, the answers will become clear.

Of course, this view has a lot of merit. Patience, perseverance and reflection do solve a lot of problems. Also, it's better to actively try to understand something instead of expecting someone to hand you the answers. However, when the onus is always on the student, it clashes with our democratic ideals of knowledge and accountability.

Experts on any subject can be wrong, and it doesn't necessarily take another expert to notice. Any reasonable person can spot problems or inconsistencies when studying something, especially something like the martial arts. Considering how many competing theories and practices there are in the arts, it would be a pretty sorry student who didn't notice some inconsistencies. Sure, students can be mistaken and sometimes see problems when there are none, but being a novice doesn't make you automatically wrong any more than being an authority makes you automatically right. Knowledge is not a function of status or rank.

If anyone can be wrong, where does that leave the mute authorities of the martial arts? Instructors who don't feel the need to make sense of their art to their students start looking like shams. They can't give you an answer because they don't have one, or they won't risk losing their exalted status by actually answering an inferior's questions. Either way, you never really know whether they do have answers to the hard questions their art inspires. In the end, all you're left with are lots of admonitions to train harder and whatever answer you can come up with on your own to fill in the gaps.

The truth is, no matter how traditional a training hall is, no one really leaves his critical faculties at the door. We all form judgments of our arts and instructors, whether we voice them or not. That's something no genuine martial arts expert should fear because whatever status he has comes from that judgment. The only reason someone is above us is because we put him there.

THE PROMISE OF TRANSFORMATION

January 2007

Someone from a gym had posted a flier near the local subway entrance. **S**Every day I'd walk past its blaring letters, which invited everyone to drop by and "change your life." That's a pretty big promise for a place that offers some aerobics classes and weight training. But that's exactly what a lot of people are looking for when they enter a gym, especially a martial arts gym.

The changes most people expect to undergo seem obvious. They want to be thinner, healthier and more attractive. They want to change their bodies and hope the process will reverse some other negatives in their lives. Often those are secondary needs, telltale symptoms of a deeper-seated yearning. When people go to a gym looking for a major life change, they seek transformation. Dropping a few pounds isn't enough; they want to become someone else entirely.

This promise of transformation is the underlying attraction in most meaningful activities. Religion, education and even art are all about becoming a different person. As an intersection of all those fields, the martial arts hold a special promise for many people. They tie on their white belts and look forward to being a special combination of warrior, scholar and priest sometime after becoming a black belt.

Unfortunately, that promise is a hard one to keep. Most expert martial artists aren't renaissance men or wise clerics. Those are roles into which only a few of the most dedicated and talented people will ever grow. Despite the odds, that ideal still attracts both talented and apparently ordinary students to the training hall. They come knowing that not everyone can transform himself into something special. But secretly, somewhere in the dark moments of reflection in which they confront failure as a real possibility, they cherish the idea that they're different. They're the one who will become that martial arts uberman.

And why shouldn't they? The truth is that success in anything is a peculiar combination of opportunity, talent and ambition. Every great fighter or martial artist started off as an ordinary person, slaving away at the basics like everyone else. Walking into a gym and aiming to transform into your ideal is as good a way to start as any.

Not reaching that ideal is unfortunate but nothing to be ashamed of. Time, ambition and talent all have their limits. Sometimes you just run out of one or more of them before becoming that ideal figure. Until then, it's a reason for getting out of bed in

the morning. It inspires good health and self-examination. It makes you a better person, even if you're essentially the same. Then, like a crucial link in an eternal relay race, you pass your knowledge and expertise on to the next person running to reach the martial ideal.

The great boxing coach Freddie Roach once said that every professional boxer should really believe he can be the champ or do something else. Attaining that goal may not happen, but if you're not reaching for it, you're wasting your time. Maybe the martial arts are the same but on a broader scale. Perhaps we should all aim for that transformation, to become that peculiar combination of athlete, artist and philosopher that's caricatured in B-movies. Not everyone reading this will change his life that much and become a truly great martial artist, but maybe some will. Maybe, just maybe, it'll be you.



PHOTO BY RICK HUSTEAD

Many people who take up the martial arts are secretly hoping to transform themselves into a warrior-scholar-priest. (For illustrative purposes, Ultimate Fighting Championship standout Diego Sanchez is shown.)

BUILDING GOOD FAITH

February 2007

The soul of persuasion is the assumption of good faith. In other words, when people want to change our minds, we have to believe their motives are pure. We have to believe that they share some notion of what's good, right or true, and we have to believe that devotion to those ideals is what moves them. Otherwise, discussion turns into an empty ritual, and nobody believes that the words really mean anything. All that comes across is cynical campaigning for our own profit or prejudices.

When martial artists argue, good faith seems in short supply. As soon as someone tries to change our minds, we become suspicious. Standard arguments are trotted out, positions harden and we start living up to stereotypes. Sport-fighting guys come across as bullies, self-defense guys sound like military absolutists and traditional martial artists seem like stubborn, irrational Orientophiles. No one's mind gets changed because everybody's talking but nobody's really listening anymore.

Of course, the main reason anyone argues about anything is each person thinks he's right. Actually, people do more with words than talk about what's true and what's not. We plead, joke, praise, intimidate, haggle, tease and more. No matter what level of truth characterizes the things we say, other martial artists judge our motives by how we use those statements.

For example, sport-fighting guys regularly try to convince traditional martial artists that there's a better way to do things. They argue that the traditional arts are untested and that their training methods are often outdated. They can make lots of cogent points about the value of competition and findings from current sports science, but most of the time they fail to make any converts because they use this knowledge to satisfy their competitive urges.

When sport fighters try to change minds, they often challenge people instead of trying to persuade them. Either you submit to the strength of a reasonable argument or you continue living in a kung fu fantasy world. Where's a traditional martial artist going to find good faith in that kind of argument? It barely matters whether the sport-fighting guy is right. Anyone on the receiving end of this kind of argument will understand that he's using the facts to belittle you or drive you away. Either way, he gets to "win" and do it under the guise of being reasonable.

I use this example because I'm a mixed martial artist myself and because I've encountered it a lot. There are other examples—such as traditional

martial artists who use the facts of their long-standing histories or well-developed philosophies in a way that minimizes all modern arts. Likewise, some military/self-defense guys use the cruelty and randomness of real violence to dismiss other ways of fighting. Anyone in the martial arts can wield their portion of the truth to negative effect, if they choose to.

The solution is for anyone who truly believes that the martial arts are a community to really examine his own motives. Everyone has to ask himself what he's really trying to accomplish with his words and arguments. Are you merely exercising anger or prejudice and driving unbelievers away from your art? Or are you approaching other martial artists with a mind that's open enough to allow the possibility of change—and with enough good faith for them to believe it?

EASTERN PERSPECTIVES

March 2007

One of the benefits of living abroad is the perspective you gain. For a martial artist in Asia, that means seeing the fighting arts in their native context. It doesn't matter which art or country you're talking about. You

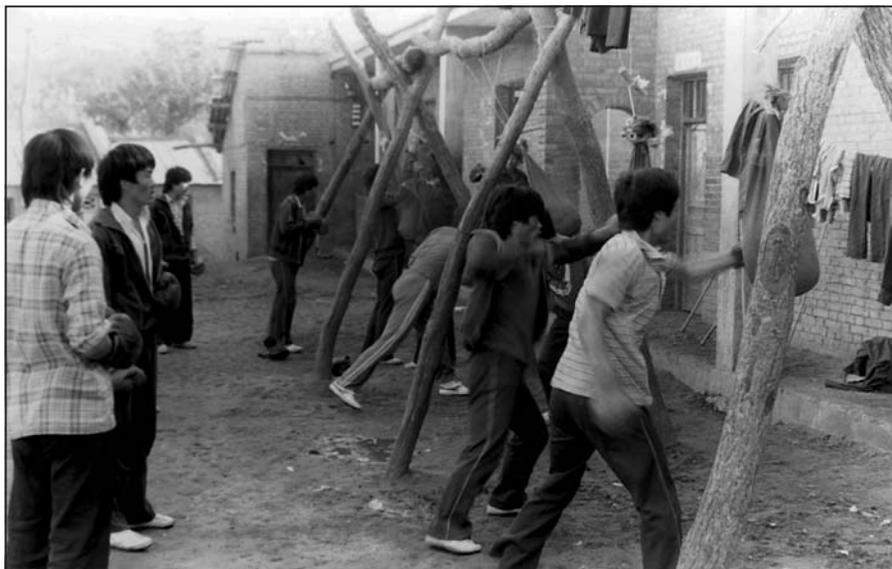


PHOTO BY ROBERT W. YOUNG

Westerners often have fanciful notions of how the martial arts are practiced in Asia. The best way to ground those notions in reality is to spend some time in your art's homeland. (For illustrative purposes, aspiring kung fu masters are shown training in China.)

understand yourself and your style of fighting better when you've lived in its homeland.

The first thing that sinks in is how things differ from what you expected. The Asian martial arts are like any exotic import to the West. They're beautiful, compelling and poorly understood. Because the human mind abhors a void, we filled those gaps in understanding with our own expectations. A practical example is the multitude of theories that were offered to explain what *kata* are really for—all of which preceded any of the valuable research that's now available.

The larger the gaps in our understanding, the more our imaginations expanded to fill them. We imagined whole new East/West hybrids to make sense of the martial arts. Western versions of the Asian arts became a collection of ideas about holism and intuition trumping the mechanics of fighting. These eventually ballooned into full-scale Asian-flavored fictions of Shangri-La, Jedi temples and underground networks of ninja.

Martial monasteries and holistic philosophies do exist, but they don't trump body mechanics. In fact, many Westerners are struck by how closely the martial arts are associated with strength and grit. In Japan, if you say you practice karate or judo, the most common response you'll encounter is, "You must be really strong." It knocks a lot of martial artists off-balance, especially when they've been taught that physical power is supposed to be beside the point.

Even holy places that teach the martial arts as part of their rites include strength training. *Black Belt* Executive Editor Robert W. Young once mentioned visiting a Buddhist temple in Korea to do a story about the martial arts training done there. While most everything about the training was as traditional as you'd expect, he was surprised to see barbells and circuit-training machines in one of the practice rooms.

Sometimes, discovering that the Asia you expected isn't the one you get is disheartening. It seems to leave you with the stark choice of accepting your art the way it is in its home country and adapting to it or continuing to live in a kung fu movie fantasy. But that's not necessarily the case.

Just because you don't find what you expected in the homeland of your art doesn't mean your expectations were foolish. The mythology you've created to fill voids in your understanding could be the beginnings of new ways and ideas in the fighting arts. Training abroad teaches you the truth about the culture and context of your art, but it also teaches you that you can contribute to it. As you make your own future in the martial arts, maybe you can become the kind of master you were looking for.

ON FORM AND BEAUTY

April 2007

One of the easiest things to dismiss in our martial arts practice is good form. It's the kind of thing only nitpickers and hopeless aesthetes are supposed to care about—fine details that don't really matter. It's also a part of the arts that many people would be happy to see go away. To them, progress means freeing information from culture-bound fighting methods so it's accessible to everyone. They believe that attention to form is excess baggage that slows us down, but is it really that disposable?

First, we must be clear about what good form is. It simply refers to the best way of doing what our arts are supposed to do. It could be a well-done karate *kata*, a nice chain of submissions on the mat, or a hip and shoulder twist in shadowboxing. Every technique has a function, and good form means following that function so our technique is as effective as it can be.

If that's the case, good form is probably the least disposable thing in the martial arts. Even if the way we actually fight deviates from it sometimes, we need that center. We need a coherent idea of how to do the techniques. It practically defines an art, and it's what focuses us in the chaos of a real fight. Without good form, we might as well be making it up as we go along.

True, form and function have grown embarrassingly far apart in some traditional martial arts. That should be even more of a reason to pay attention to good form. Just because *kata* and sparring don't match up so well now doesn't mean that was always the case. Preserving to the best of our ability all the *kata* we learn—even if we don't understand them perfectly—maximizes our chances of recovering that lost knowledge. It provides a framework for rediscovery.

Some might argue that good form in many martial arts is just an expression of function. It's true; there is an aesthetic element in most traditional arts. They're not just functional. They're also beautiful, and anyone who says beauty is disposable in the martial arts is being disingenuous. Beauty is a basic human need, and that need is present in virtually everything we do. If it wasn't important, we'd all be happy living in identical gray houses, eating colorless food and dating people on the basis of personality alone.

If aesthetics didn't matter in fighting, we wouldn't hear so much complaining about ugly fights and dull champions. Perhaps the best example of this is former heavyweight boxing champion John Ruiz. He was one of the most successful fighters of the past 10 years, beating five top contend-

PHOTO BY RICK HUSTEAD



Good form is a requirement for maximum efficiency and effectiveness.

it to be pleasing. We need it to be something that wins us fights and satisfies our souls. The puritans and scoffers can try their best not to care about how an art looks, but sometimes beauty is more than skin-deep and even the hardest critic is forced to take a look and look again.

ers in title defenses. But Ruiz had few fans and was reviled by sportswriters because of his “jab and grab” style. He would wait for an opening and hit his opponent with one or two punches, then immediately clinch before the guy could counter or move. This artless but effective strategy would go on for round after grindingly boring round in fight after ho-hum fight. Ruiz would win big bouts, but he always won ugly, and that meant fight fans couldn’t wait to see him lose the title.

In short, we need fighting to be functional and beautiful. We need the knowledge of how to fight to be distilled into some sense of good form, and we need

A FIGHTING LEGEND RETIRES

May 2007

As the mixed martial arts come of age in the United States, many of the original stars are ending their careers. Most of those retiring fighters, like Ken Shamrock and Bas Rutten, are well known to American fans. In fact, fans can often recite their biographies like they were story lines in a movie. But there are other MMA heroes riding off into the sunset who aren't household names in the United States. One of them is Japan's Tsuyoshi Kosaka.

The reason I'm singling out Kosaka is his many accomplishments. The short list includes submitting former Ultimate Fighting Championship heavyweight champ Maurice Smith, knocking out Brazilian *jiu-jitsu* legend Mario Sperry and beating super-heavyweight Ron Waterman to win the King of Pancrase title. But Kosaka is most famous for handing the baddest man on the planet, PRIDE's heavyweight champ Fedor Emelianenko, his only loss.

"That was kind of an accident," Kosaka says with a smile as he reflects on the match. "I was looking across the ring at [Emelianenko], and he had eyes like a wild animal. I was thinking, I've got to hit him first!"

Kosaka laughs, then settles into a white couch in his office at his A-SQUARE gym. "It was just the side of my glove that cut him," he continues. "Even though I got the win, I wasn't happy about it."

TK, as his fans call him, is modest when talking about his fights. But there's nothing modest about his ambitions. As early as his junior-high school days, he was obsessed with getting stronger and becoming a fighter. His two older brothers were into judo and "beating on [him] all the time," he says. So he took up judo, eventually ending up on a semiprofessional team sponsored by a textile firm. Even though he was considered an employee of the company, Kosaka says it was "20 percent office work and 80 percent [judo] training."

For a lot of athletes, the company gig would be ideal, but Kosaka's ambitions made him restless. After seeing some of the early RINGS shows, he felt compelled to take on the challenge of MMA. He left the judo team and started over on the RINGS circuit. It was there that he formed a friendship that would change his life.

In one of his earliest bouts, Kosaka beat Smith via a heel hook. After the match, the two became friends and eventually started training together. Kosaka described it as a two-way street: He taught Smith grappling, and

Smith helped him improve his punching and kicking. Everyone at the gym learned from one another. When Kosaka opened his own gym in Japan, he tried to recreate that atmosphere.

After many flights between Tokyo and Seattle, Kosaka decided to relocate to the United States and train with Smith for a few years. That led to UFC bouts with Kimo Leopoldo and Pete Williams. After winning those matches, he was told by the promoter that he and Ruten were the top contenders and would have to fight to decide who would vie for the heavyweight title.

“I wouldn’t have fought Bas if the UFC hadn’t asked me to,” Kosaka says. He then describes how he and Ruten are close friends who share the same feelings about fighting. When he’s reminded that his battle with Ruten was a wicked one, Kosaka laughs.

“It’s because you’re friends [that] you can fight hard like that,” he says. No bitter feelings, just a heavyweight title both guys want badly but only one can win.

After his American run, Kosaka returned to RINGS and fought some of his most memorable matches. In addition to the aforementioned fight with Emelianenko, Kosaka fought Antonio Rodrigo Nogueira to a draw. In a match he describes as “a lot of fun,” the Japanese veteran held his own against the best jiu-jitsu heavyweight in MMA.

When the RINGS promotion went out of business, Kosaka fought in a number of shows, most notably earning the King of Pancrase title by winning a decision over Waterman, who outweighed him by 60 pounds. Kosaka explains his victory: “I have confidence fighting against big guys because they move big.”

In the final phase of his career, Kosaka made one last push for the title. He entered the 2006 PRIDE Open Weight Grand Prix. To get there, he knocked out Sperry, one of the best submission fighters alive. “I wasn’t thinking about having a long fight,” Kosaka recalls. “Any situation except a long fight.” True to his word, he came out brawling and KO’d Sperry in less than two minutes.

Kosaka’s next fight was his last. He said in the press that if he lost in the Open Weight Grand Prix, he’d retire. Many thought he had an excellent chance of beating his opponent, kickboxing champion Mark Hunt, because all he had to do was get Hunt on the ground and use his superior grappling skills. Kosaka, however, had other ideas.

“Of course, I wanted to win the tournament,” he says. “But I also wanted to put all my life and experience into that fight.”

His aim was to show his fighting spirit. It was more important that he finish his career with a bout he could be proud of rather than a quick, efficient submission. To prove his point, Kosaka stood toe-to-toe with Hunt and traded punches for most of the fight. He ended up losing, but he got to leave the game on his own terms.

WHY JAPAN LOVES MIXED MARTIAL ARTS

June 2007

The mixed martial arts are booming in the United States, but it's a recent development. For years, they've enjoyed a popularity abroad that dwarfed anything in America. While the Ultimate Fighting Championship was struggling to survive in the face of ignorant media attacks, hostile athletic commissions and powerful political opponents—like Arizona senator and presidential candidate John McCain—the PRIDE Fighting Championships were packing crowds into sports arenas in Japan. In fact, Japanese interest in *sogo kakutougi* (composite fighting) ballooned to the point that PRIDE and K-1 co-promoted an event in 2002 that filled Shinjuku Stadium.

Why the stark contrast? Why did MMA become hot in Japan but nearly criminalized in America? What's so different about the cultural climate on these islands that allows MMA to flourish?

One obvious explanation is that there's a long and rich martial arts history in Japan. You could find analogs to today's MMA in the challenge matches that shaped jujutsu and many other arts. But it's not those long-ago challenges and successes, those individual historical instances of martial arts duels, that make such a difference. Most Japanese are as unaware of their country's arcane historical details as people of other nations are of their own. It's the cumulative effect of that history that helps normalize MMA in Japan. Kicking, choking and joint locking are commonplace in the Japanese fighting sports and have been for a long time. Even to the average person, they're no more (or less) alarming than punching someone.

The effect of this basic, cultural difference is hard to overstate. To most Americans, even as late as the 1980s, fair fighting meant boxing or wrestling. You punched your opponent or you pinned him. Kicking people, especially below the belt, was dirty fighting, and choking was something thugs or assassins did. Contrast that with kids learning judo in Japanese high schools and the Japanese acceptance of bare-knuckle, leg-kicking karate as a sport.

If a culture accepts chokes and kicks as legitimate techniques in different sports, it will be primed to accept them being mixed together to make a hybrid fighting sport.

Still, plenty of Asian nations have long and rich martial arts traditions. Those countries should've been equally ready to embrace MMA. Why did it get so big, so quickly in Japan first? Why not Thailand, Taiwan or South Korea? Because of pro wrestling.

Pro wrestling laid the groundwork for MMA's popularity by becoming part of the national narrative. In the years after World War II, pro wrestling helped Japan exorcise feelings of inferiority and defeat. Wrestlers like Riki-doan beating foreigners was a scenario people wanted to see played out in real life. When Antonio Inoki fought boxer Muhammad Ali to a draw in the mid-1970s, it further stoked that desire. By the mid-1980s, promotions like Shooto and Shootboxing were staging real, proto-MMA fights. So it should come as no surprise that the major Japanese MMA promotions of the 1990s (RINGS, Pancrase and PRIDE) were centered around star wrestlers. Those men were the natural choices to be conquering heroes.

Of course, there are other reasons MMA took hold in Japan. Some have to do with a strange mix of nationalism and feelings of inferiority that seem part of the national psyche. Others have to do with a kind of virtue, bordering on the spiritual, that accompanies pushing yourself to your athletic limits. But the main reason MMA took off here was made clear when Kazushi Sakuraba, a pro wrestler, was consistently beating some of the best fighters in the world, among them Royce Gracie. He was making a dream come true—by winning.

TAKING A SHOT AT SHOOTBOXING

July 2007

Sometimes, you just can't let go. You get older and slower without shedding the competitive urge. I'm 36, one year past amateur boxing's masters division, an age at which I should stop trading punches with youngsters and accept my limitations. Instead, I entered the 17th All-Japan Amateur Shootboxing Tournament.

Shootboxing is a sport and a fight organization founded in 1985 by former kickboxing champion Caesar Takeshi. The organization defines the sport as "standing *vale tudo*," but I like to think of it as kickboxing for mixed martial artists. In a professional match, you can use punches, kicks, knees,

elbows, throws and submission holds, but only while standing. Once a fight goes to the ground, the action is stopped until the participants stand.

Amateur shootboxing is more like kickboxing with throws. There are no knees to the head, elbows or standing submissions. Still, it's dangerous. I saw two guys get knocked out cold in my tournament, one by a kick to the neck and another by a perfectly timed spinning backfist. A past competitor told me that he managed to break his femur and fracture his skull in consecutive events.

Many shootboxing amateurs aim to turn pro. Well-known fighters like MMA star Hayato "Mach" Sakurai and K-1 veteran/shootboxing champ Kenichi Ogata got their start in it. I wasn't aiming that high. I just wanted to win my division and earn the right to advance to the next level.

Training for amateur shootboxing means lots of punches, kicks, throws and cardio. So I started working out six days a week. Some days revolved around boring but necessary cardio work on a treadmill. Other days, I'd spar five to eight rounds with upcoming fighter Minoru Kato, then do focus-mitt drills. Most days, I'd go through a standard 12-round gym workout. That included three rounds each of shadowboxing, continuous-punching drills, combinations on the heavy bag and tossing around a throwing dummy.

The worst part was throwing that dummy. In shootboxing, your opponent's feet must go above waist level during a throw, or it's not worth any points. In practice, you hoist the dummy as high as possible and slam it down as quickly as you can for three minutes straight. After a couple of weeks, I got used to finishing my workouts with three rounds of that, but I hated every minute of it.

On tournament day, I felt ready, but my cornerman backed out at the last minute. Luckily, at the venue I met a pro fighter named Yoshifumi "Samurai" Hishida. He explained that his group, Riki Gym, runs a program for at-risk kids and that some of them were fighting in the event. When he heard about my situation, he offered to corner me. My first fight was against a guy from Tachibana Kempo Kai. Hishida said that the style is listed as *kempo* but that they fight like kickboxers. He was already proving his worth.

I was in the heavyweight division, which included everyone who weighed more than 169.4 pounds, making it a strange mix of light-heavyweights and true heavies. It also meant I'd have fewer fights because only eight guys had entered. Meanwhile, the other divisions had up to 30 entrants; they were the real tough guys.

My first opponent was a short, heavy guy who resembled the James

Bond villain “Oddjob.” His warm-up consisted of an endlessly repeated jab/cross combination. Once we started, his strategy focused on using that combination, closing the distance and trying to throw me. In shootboxing, a solid throw is the same as a knockdown. Because each match is only one three-minute round, getting thrown means you’ll almost certainly lose.

My plan was to use kicks to set up punch combinations. It worked well against the kempo guy because I fought right-side-forward and he fought with a left lead. After two kicks that moved him where I wanted him, he charged in with his big combination. I slipped my head to the outside of his jab and smashed him with a left cross. The rest of the fight was a lot like that. When he closed the distance, I hung on him like a wet blanket as he searched for a match-winning throw. After three minutes, he had a busted nose, and I had a unanimous decision.

My second match was against a 20-year-old American soldier who’d done a few years of shootboxing and Brazilian jiu-jitsu. That’s all I needed—a tough kid raised on cross-training. I’d also twisted my knee in the first bout and knew I wouldn’t be kicking much. It was starting to look like weight was my only advantage against this kid.

My strategy of using kicks before punches wasn’t working. With so little time to make your mark, these matches are like sprints. If your opponent is succeeding, you have to counter and score quickly or lose. I got close and unloaded punches. The Army guy clinched and kneed me in the body. I thought I was losing on the scorecards, then I got lucky. While struggling in the clinch, my right arm ended up around his neck. It felt just like dummy-throwing practice, so I turned my hip and tossed him automatically. That throw earned me a berth in the finals.

After the match, Hishida introduced me to his teacher: “Mr. Suzuki is a very famous bone setter.” As my leg was hurting badly, I jokingly asked whether he could put my shin together if it snapped during the final. They just smiled and nodded, which was ominous yet reassuring.

When I saw my opponent, I almost felt bad. A light-heavyweight from Caesar Gym, he was one of the smaller guys, so it seemed like I’d have an unfair advantage. Appearances aside, though, he’d defeated two big guys to reach the final and was pretty determined to beat me, too. I even have a blurry photo of him pushing my face sideways with a front kick to prove it.

What I remember from the fight was finding his chin repeatedly with a left cross. I say it like that because fighting is often a series of flash memories with lots of blanks in between. For example, I distinctly recall knocking him down a couple of times with a cross. I remember setting

up those punches and the way his head looked as it snapped back, but I don't remember taking that kick to the face. I'll have to wait for the video to see what happened.

In the end, he survived my knockdowns and made it to the bell. He won a moral victory by not giving up, but I won the match and the heavyweight tournament, and that felt pretty good. At an age when I'm supposed to drop my expectations, I became an amateur shootboxing champion. Now all that's left is to fight pro—without ending up at the bone setter's clinic.

VIRGINIA TECH AND THE SPIRIT OF SELF-DEFENSE

August 2007

Like most Americans, I was shocked and saddened by the shootings at Virginia Tech on April 16, 2007. Watching news reports felt surreal to me because I know the campus. A decade ago, I studied at a nearby university. I often went to Virginia Tech to visit friends or use the library. As I sat half-awake watching the morning news here in Tokyo that day, I thought my mind was playing tricks on me. Were all those news anchors really standing in familiar places in Blacksburg, Virginia, covering the worst shooting rampage in American history?

But you don't have to be familiar with the people and places involved to feel sympathy. Reports of a tragedy always draw us into the victims' points of view. We learn terrible details and involuntarily imagine what it was like to be them. We strive to reduce the pain of the victims and their families by trying to feel what they feel and carry some small part of their burden. Maybe it helps, maybe it doesn't. But it's inhuman to let someone suffer loss alone.

As the reporters learned more and the sequence of events became clearer, it was easy to feel fiercely proud of those who tried to stop the massacre and save lives. Many people tried to distract or confront the gunman. Some even sacrificed themselves so others could escape. The most heartbreaking was the story of Romanian engineering professor Liviu Librescu. The 76-year-old holocaust survivor held a door shut while his students climbed through windows. The gunman fired a number of rounds through the door, and Librescu was shot to death.

In the days following the shooting, many articles recounted the role Librescu and others played in saving people's lives. But then, predictably I suppose, articles questioning the courage of the students who didn't con-

front the gunman began to appear. Leading the charge was John Derbyshire at the *New Republic*, who asked, “Where was the spirit of self-defense here? ... Why didn’t anyone rush the guy?” Then he minimized the danger by pointing out that one of the shooter’s weapons was a small-caliber handgun and seemed amazed that the victims didn’t “count the shots and jump him [while he was] reloading.”

Hot on his heels, Nathaniel Blake at *Human Events Online* quoted Derbyshire and openly questioned the courage of the students who were being gunned down. “Where were the men?” he asked, then stated, “Among the first rules of manliness are fighting bad guys and protecting others, in a word: courage. And not a one of the healthy young fellows in the classrooms seems to have done that.”

Of course, both Derbyshire and Blake attempted to fireproof their criticism by mentioning that they might not live up to their own ideals of courage and manliness in the same situation. But that self-serving brand of sympathy doesn’t undo the critical bite. It doesn’t change that they accused the real victims of a real tragedy (who didn’t live up to their expectations) of being cowards.

My blood was boiling after reading that. It seemed infinitely more cowardly to question someone else’s courage after the fact than to hide from some nut firing bullets into people at random. But the more I thought about it, the less important moral outrage seemed. Judging people as courageous or cowardly was beside the point. The question was whether this was really about courage at all.

When trying to understand why people act the way they do, we stumble onto the fundamental attribution error. In social psychology, it defines the tendency people have of overemphasizing personality traits when explaining another person’s behavior and underemphasizing the effect of the situation or environment. For example, you might assume that the waitress working your table is lazy if she moves slowly or misunderstands your order. Ask a few questions, and you might find out she’s a single mom with two jobs who gets no sleep and acts like a zombie because of it. The fundamental attribution error lies in assuming that the waitress has a character flaw before thinking about other, external reasons for her behavior.

In the case of Derbyshire and Blake judging the Virginia Tech students, the error is glaring. Many factors affected the self-defense decisions they made. There was the time of the shootings, how the shooter approached his victims, how skilled he was at using the guns, the structure of the rooms and halls, how much the students knew about guns, how long it took stu-

dents in nearby rooms to realize that a massacre was going on, whether they realized there was just one shooter and so on. Simply assuming that some were courageous and others were cowardly based on what they did before even considering situational causes is about as fundamental as attribution error gets.

In a follow-up article, Blake summed up his position: “Courage is real and it is good; cowardice is real and it is bad. And that remains true, and I will believe it, even if I prove to be cowardly and not courageous when the time comes.”

I would also add that error is real and it’s bad, regardless of what you believe about courage or cowardice. It’s an error to judge people’s character before considering other causes, especially in life-and-death situations. The question is, Can we admit the error when the time comes and actually understand tragedies like the Virginia Tech shootings?

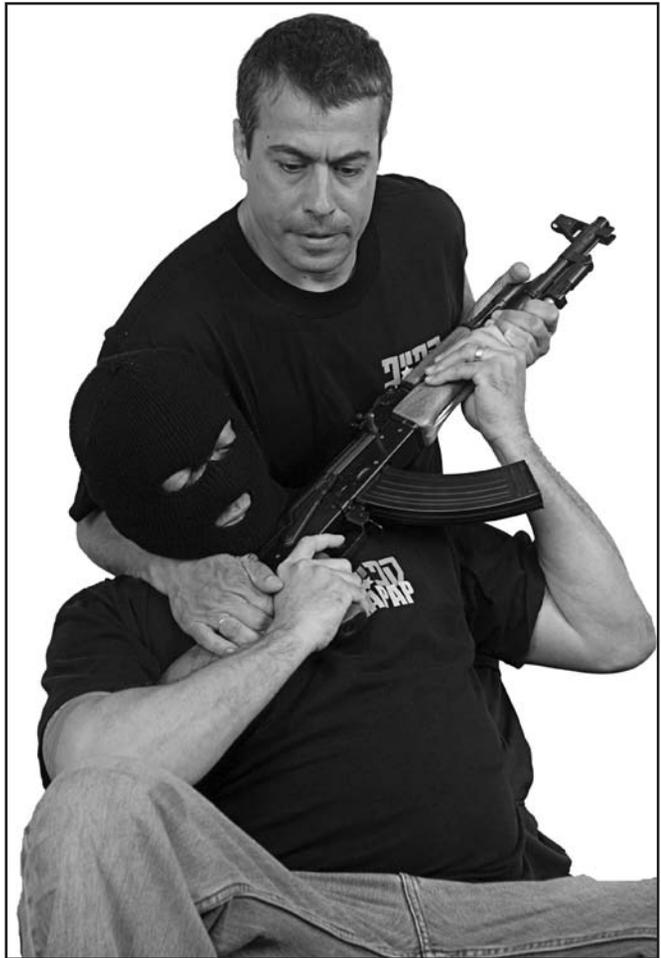


PHOTO BY RICK HUSTEAD

Unless you’re an experienced professional like Maj. Avi Nardia (above), you can’t know for certain how you’ll react if you’re confronted by a killer.

ENDURING VALUES CAPTURED ON FILM

September 2007

It's hard to make a movie that's really compelling. It's even harder to make a martial arts movie that gets it right. Usually the fight scenes look good and the story nods at some martial ethics or mysticism, but they don't really move you. One of those rare movies that got it right was *The Karate Kid*.

For those few who may not have seen it, *The Karate Kid* tells the story of a skinny teenager named Daniel LaRusso who moves from New Jersey to California in the early 1980s. Within a day of arriving, he meets a nice girl named Ali and tries to ask her out on a date. But the girl's jealous karate champ ex-boyfriend, Johnny, shows up and stomps Daniel's guts out. The rest of the movie is about the weak but lovable outsider failing to get the girl or even defend himself until he finds an old-school karate master who helps him. By the end of the film, he beats the jealous ex-boyfriend, becomes a karate champion and wins the heart of the girl.

The story doesn't sound that compelling when you sum it up in a paragraph, but it is. As the characters develop, they really move you. You suffer along with Daniel as he tries to stand up for himself again and again. You can feel your bile rise as Johnny becomes increasingly cruel, to the point at which it seems like he's on the verge of beating Daniel to death. Only the intervention of Mr. Miyagi, the aging karate master, saves him.

Of course, Daniel asks the master to teach him, and Miyagi agrees—and this is where the movie really hooks you. The childless Miyagi becomes a surrogate father who teaches Daniel how to fight and how to be a good man. By the end of the movie, it's not just about winning the All-Valley Karate Tournament or being strong and brave. It's about proving that a warm teacher/student relationship is the way the martial arts are supposed to be.

The best proof that *The Karate Kid* still moves people, though, is that it never left our cultural consciousness. More than 20 years have passed since it was released, and you can still say lines like, "Wax on, wax off," or "Sweep the leg, Johnny," and people immediately know what you're talking about. There are a dozen Web sites about the franchise and a documentary about its fans. In fact, there was even a song released in 2006 called "Sweep the Leg," by No More Kings, that told *The Karate Kid* story from the villain's point of view. It became a minor sensation because many of the original cast members appeared in the music video.

Of course, not everything in the movie stands the test of time. The music and fashion are hopelessly dated. More to the point, though, the karate

is dated, too. The idea of Johnny crippling Daniel with a single leg sweep seems almost quaint. *Muay Thai* and *kyokushin* karate are so familiar now that we know how much abuse an athlete's legs can take. And the movie's signature crane kick that wins Daniel the tournament is the well-deserved butt of many jokes. Has anyone ever used that in a fight and won?

Really, though, stretching the truth a little with respect to techniques doesn't take away from the storytelling. And what the story tells us is that this could be you. There are no elite warriors dueling in coliseums or ninja shooting lasers out of their eyes in *The Karate Kid*. The main character is just a skinny kid who becomes a good fighter and a good man. And that's the kind of story that never gets old.

IMPROVING ON NATURE

October 2007

If there's one thing most martial artists agree on, it's that physical strength isn't the answer. It could be guys in traditional Asian arts kvetching about mixed martial artists being muscle-bound brawlers, or it could be Brazilian *jiu-jitsu* players looking down their noses at big guys pounding out wins in the cage, but it's all a variation on the same theme: Power is primitive, and skill is what makes the martial arts special.

It's easy to see why strength gets dismissed in our arts. First, simply overpowering someone is an unreliable strategy. It works only if your opponent is weaker than you and knows nothing about fighting. A bigger guy will outmuscle you, and a more skilled guy will find a way around your power. So guys who rely on strength can reliably beat only weak novices and, really, how often would you fight someone like that?

Second, if the only people you can beat are smaller and weaker than you, there's nothing good about winning. The whole point of the martial arts is to give everyone who trains hard, especially if he's small and weak, a way to prevail. So if you win fights by overpowering people, you're probably one of the bad guys. The martial arts aren't for you; they're a response to guys like you.

Third and most important, strength is about size, and that makes it accidental. You're born a lightweight or a heavyweight, and that determines how strong you can be. Sure, you can lift weights and get a little more muscular, but it's not going to make much of a difference against someone five weight classes above you. Relying on strength is for natural super-



PHOTO BY RICK HUSTEAD

The reason the martial arts have remained so popular over the centuries is they permit a smaller person to physically prevail over a larger attacker. (For illustrative purposes, Kathy Long is shown.)

heavyweights. For everyone else, it means surrendering to the accident of birth and accepting some level of weakness as your destiny.

Skill, on the other hand, is the one thing you can change that really makes a difference. And unlike size and strength, your degree of skill is totally up to you. The better your technique and understanding of fighting are, the more they make up for your shortcomings. A guy who's substantially better at the techniques and strategies of a fighting art can beat people who are a lot bigger, stronger, faster and younger.

A good example is boxer James Toney. In the early 1990s, he was a middleweight champion known for his outstanding defense and counter-punching ability. These days, Toney is obese and nearly 40, but his skills are so good that he's been considered a top heavyweight fighter for the past four years.

Of course, not everyone can be a champion fighter like Toney, but you can rebel against the limits nature imposed on your physique. Learn ways to

redirect strength. Develop your timing and balance, and get good at reading and countering an opponent's attacks. These and other methods are open to anyone who's willing to put time and effort into learning them. Unlike strength and size, the amount of skill you can develop is virtually unlimited.

If you keep pushing and gain some decent martial arts ability, the average guy who just happens to be bigger than you won't be able to beat you. Reaching that point means you've bested more than the average big guy. It means you've beaten Mother Nature in the battle over who you are. By rebelling against the primacy of strength and succeeding, you exemplify the way martial artists generally think the world should work—and that's as a place where all people can overcome their limitations.

THE ROOTS REMAIN

November 2007

For some people, a traditional art is enough. They develop an interest in the martial arts, find one that suits them, grow from a beginner to an expert and foster the next generation of traditionalists. It's a nice, tidy arc, but it's not for everyone.

Traditional Asian styles aren't always the end destination in the martial arts. For lots of kids being raised on mixed martial arts, they're not even the beginning. For people older than 25, the traditional arts were a kind of developmental stage many went through. Much like Bruce Lee growing from *wing chun* kung fu to *jeet kune do*, accomplished instructors and fighting athletes have transitioned from Asian self-defense and fighting styles to something else.

The most familiar example of this is the growth of kickboxing in the United States. Traditional martial artists in America went from no competitions at all to point-fighting tournaments to full-contact kickboxing (no leg kicks, knees or elbows) in the space of a few decades. Bill Wallace, Joe Lewis and Benny Urquidez were traditional martial artists and point fighters before they became kickboxing champs. It was such a natural transition that karate *dojo* and point tournaments became the de facto farm leagues for American kickboxing.

This story isn't unique to the United States. In the 1950s and '60s, Masutatsu Oyama reshaped the older karate styles he'd learned into the full-contact, bare-knuckle style that became *kyokushin*. The more ambitious *kyokushin* stylists fought challenge matches against *muay Thai* athletes. As

a result, Japanese kickboxing was born from the efforts of karate-rooted pioneers. The two are so closely associated that the term *maashiyaru aatsu* (Japanese pronunciation of “martial arts”) usually refers to kickboxing.

This progression has been duplicated in K-1, which has grown into Japan’s premier fighting sport. Most K-1 fighters started as bare-knuckle karate guys, often going through a stage of “glove karate” before competing in the big shows. A good example is K-1 heavyweight Semmy Schilt, who was a European karate and *daidojuku* (a hybrid karate/grappling style) champ before he pounded a path to the top ranks of K-1.

Today, the path is well known, but it’s not the only one that goes from the martial arts to sport fighting. The more you look, the more you’ll find stories of restless spirits eager to take what they’ve learned in new directions. Tsuyoshi Kosaka and Yoon Dong-Sik started as high-level *judoka* and took those skills to the MMA ring. Even Olympic judo medalists like Hidehiko Yoshida and Pawel Nastula charged ahead with professional MMA careers at the end of long, successful amateur ones. In addition, there are less-common paths, like the one followed by Kathy Long, who began in kung fu *san soo* and wound up being the best female kickboxer of her time, or *shorinji kempo* black-belt Hiroki Shishido, who became shootboxing’s welterweight ace.

Of course, restless spirits don’t always become fighting athletes. Some take traditional martial arts experience and retool it into pure self-defense. The prototype was William E. Fairbairn, a British military man who served time in early 20th-century Shanghai, China. He studied Asian martial arts, extracted a self-defense system from them, dubbed it “defendu” and applied it in his law-enforcement work in the city’s notoriously wild streets.

Since then, many of the top names in self-defense have followed a similar path. After studying old Asian styles and using them in law enforcement or combat, they created their own systems based on those experiences. While some discarded the ritual and philosophy associated with the Asian arts, most reality-based self-defense experts have a few well-worn karate and judo uniforms stashed away in their closets.

The main point is that the traditional arts seem to be a major part of everyone’s martial arts journey. Some stick with an older style and are content with what it offers. Others stretch those arts to accommodate a sport or self-defense application or even to birth a new system like Lee did with jeet kune do. But no one escapes the pull of the collective experience and wisdom that the traditional arts contain. Whether it’s a home or a rite of passage, the traditional arts define us.

BEING PRACTICAL

December 2007

An easy way to insult a martial artist is to tell him that what he's doing isn't practical. It's the kind of comment that makes us immediately defensive because there's no way we can know for sure whether we'll be able to use what we know in a fight. Yet there's more to it than that. Maybe we protest a little too much. Maybe deep down, a lot of martial artists aren't very interested in what's practical.

That may seem counterintuitive. The martial arts are essentially martial, so on a fundamental level, they're always about fighting. If the practical, how-to elements weren't there, they wouldn't be fighting arts. They'd be theatrical arts, like acrobatics or dance. But seeing something as practical is a matter of perspective.

First, there's nothing practical about the average person mastering a fighting art. Most people will go their entire lives without ever having to defend themselves in hand-to-hand combat. When you consider how much time, money and effort it takes to really get good at any kind of fighting, it makes you wonder why the average person even bothers. Outside of a few professions like law enforcement, security and the military, the basic costs of becoming a genuinely good fighter outweigh the economic benefits.

Second, the skill set of any martial art has limitations and flaws. A careful observer could find lots of techniques and strategies in any given art that can be labeled impractical. That doesn't stop people from practicing and perpetuating the art, however. For example, bare-knuckle karate fighters are allowed to kick to the head but not punch to the head. So they get in the habit of not worrying about getting punched in the face, which prompts some to criticize it as impractical. That hasn't stopped droves of full-contact karate guys from continuing to fight that way, though.

Third, some arts develop skills to such a degree that they're overkill in normal society. A case could be made that the fight sports and some military combatives systems are actually hyper-practical. For example, a boxer or kickboxer is typically in such good shape that he can beat on another man's face for an hour. That's way more brutal than most situations outside of a boxing match require. Likewise, some combatives-honed experts develop knife and gun skills that are normal on a battlefield but overkill in civilian life.

The passion people often have for the martial arts is not about what's practical or normal. It's about expanding a special skill and point of

PHOTO BY ROBERT W. YOUNG



Professional kickboxers like Peter Aerts (left, shown in a K-1 bout) are capable of pummeling an opponent for an hour, but it's difficult to conceive of a self-defense situation that would require such stamina.

view so far beyond what's normal that it makes them extraordinary. All that time, money and effort put into mastering a martial art are about wringing as much magic and meaning out of human potential as they can.

The truth is, there are few things less compelling in life than everyday, practical demands. That principle extends to fighting, in which practical skills are just a minimum requirement. What is compelling in the martial arts,

as in life, is all the stuff that isn't strictly necessary. That means all those fighting techniques for obsolete weapons like the staff and *nunchaku*. It means the heroic level of conditioning in fight gyms. It also means the warrior Zen teachings and battlefield strategies, all of which are a million miles away from most people's lives. They're the impractical things that make the martial arts bigger than the chore of self-defense.

Practicality has only one virtue in the martial arts: It's what distinguishes a martial art from martial theater. After that, it merely makes the arts smaller. Demanding practicality can reduce everything in the arts to the level of general-consensus self-defense. But give martial artists and their ideas a chance to develop in their own direction, and you'll usually be rewarded with something better than practical.

WHAT HAPPENS IF EVERYTHING GOES RIGHT?

January 2008

The late 1970s and early '80s were a strange time. It was an era of arena rock and stadium sports, during which fame had expanded to absurd proportions. This was especially true in the fight sports. Title bouts were becoming global events, and Muhammad Ali was the most famous athlete on the planet. But, like the era's monster-rock bands and dynastic football teams, Ali enjoyed a fame that expanded until it eventually obscured his decline.

Although his skills seemed to deteriorate with each successive bout between 1976 and 1981, people kept showing up to see Ali perform. It was as if people loved his public persona so much that they couldn't resist believing in him. By the time he sleepwalked through his final fight with Trevor Berbick in 1981, people stopped believing and "The Greatest" retired for good.

Looking back, it's easy to see those years as a general lesson about the perils of fame. But Ali's denouement is a special lesson for mixed martial artists. It isn't so much a tragic, cautionary tale about fight-induced brain damage as it is a lesson about the limits of success. What happens if everything goes right? What happens if you reach the summit of Mount Olympus and can go no higher? Most of all, what happens when you've stayed as long as you can and it's time to leave?

As MMA grows in leaps and bounds, those are questions worth asking. One day soon, our sport will be as big as boxing, maybe bigger. That means it will attract increasingly talented and intelligent athletes until it produces fighters like Ali, men whose careers sum up the heroic yearnings of a generation. Ali showed how good it could get for a fighter, and it still didn't end well for him.

When you view the clips and interviews from Ali's final fights, he just looks tired. As he mumbles about the glory of possibly winning the heavy-weight title a record fourth time, it sounds hollow. He can't seem to convince himself, let alone the interviewer, that there's any point to being the champ again. He just seems happy that people are paying attention to him.

The fact that there was no point is exactly the problem. The best reason to get in the ring and fight is to prove something. Usually, it's to prove your own ability. But at the level of great fighters like Ali, it's to make a larger point about something. During his best years, he proved that a pacifist and war resister could also be the baddest man on the planet. But

he wasn't making that point in 1981; he was an old celebrity indulging a dangerous habit.

Watching MMA grow in size and popularity, it's easy to wonder whether it will lead its stars to the same ends as great boxers. Will it turn into an athletic festival of fame in which being known and seen is the point? Or will we somehow manage to carry the insights and ethos of the martial arts into this, our fledgling sport?

One of the most consistent themes across the martial arts is that they, paradoxically, aren't about fighting. Some martial artists take it to absurd extremes, but it's a basically valid idea. The arts are a way of life you learn through fighting. The message is broader and deeper than the fights themselves. It's about what you are before you step in the ring, during your career and after you return to normal life when the fighting is over. A man who's only a fighter, who really feels alive only in those brief moments in the ring, is living a kind of fever dream. The common wisdom of the martial arts is the antidote.

What MMA guys with a sense of destiny can learn from the example of boxing is that they already have the answer. They have the broad perspective from the traditional arts and the sense that sport fighting is about proving a point. The wisest martial artists fight long enough to make their point and then descend from Olympus when it's time. The others ride their celebrity as long as they can and fight in increasingly less-meaningful matches.

After Ali fought his last bout, he said that Father Time beat him, not Berbick. But it didn't have to be that way. Ali, like anyone else, could've left boxing after he made his point. The only thing he lacked was a way to let go of success after it had let go of him. Let's hope that future MMA greats will make better decisions after they've made their point in the ring.

BIG IN JAPAN

February 2008

A few years ago, Brazilian *jiu-jitsu* standout Nino "Elvis" Schembri was a regular in big mixed-martial arts shows in Japan. His ring name was "Elvis" because he sported big lamb-chop sideburns, wore a white, sequined, bell-bottom jumpsuit and made his entrance to Elvis Presley tunes. There was a lot of buzz on the Internet about this shtick and how the Japanese fans would go nuts for it. Schembri was going to be big here, they said. As a longtime resident, I had my doubts.

Like most people, I'm not a good judge of why individuals become celebrities. I'm as surprised now by Paris Hilton's fan clubs as I was by Vanna White's back in the 1980s. But one thing foreigners living in Japan have is a sense of context. We may not be able to say with any certainty why another foreigner captures the local imagination, but we can say what does and doesn't fit the local narrative.

All those weird Japanese ring entrances and fighter personae are not random (except for Ikuhisa Minowa, whose shtick is being random). They generally make perfect sense to Japanese fans. For example, when Kazushi Sakuraba fought Wanderlei Silva the second time, he showed up in a *kabuki* mask. When he tore it off and spit green mist into the air, the 40,000-plus Japanese crowd at the Tokyo Dome were ecstatic. Why? It was an hom-



Kazushi Sakuraba is a Japanese fighter who's big on entrances. Before his fight with Royce Gracie at the PRIDE Grand Prix 2000, he dyed his hair bright red and strode to the ring with two other men, all of whom were sporting pro-wrestling-style hoods.



PHOTOS BY ROBERT W. YOUNG

age to a pro wrestler, the Great Muta, and it was an acknowledgment that Sakuraba was stepping into the ring as a pro wrestler. Why does that matter? There's a streak of nationalism in all high-profile fights. Going back to the 1950s, pro wrestlers restored national pride by beating foreigners. Sakuraba showed he was carrying on that tradition with his entrance.

A more recent case of puzzling persona is Akihiro Gono calling himself "D.J. Gozma," donning a giant Afro wig and dancing his way to the ring. This entrance was a parody of a popular Japanese singer, D.J. Ozma. To fight fans outside Japan, Gono's entrance seemed random, but it was actually a calculated move to increase his popularity among Japanese fans.

Without this sense of context, fighters trying to make it big in Japan struggle to connect with fans. They see what guys like Sakuraba, Gono, Genki Sudo and others do and try to imitate it. They dye their hair bright colors, wear funny costumes and so on. But their efforts make as little sense to Japanese fans as Sakuraba's green spit did to foreign fans.

Going back to the Schembri example, his "Elvis" gimmick came across as random. There was no context for it. To Japanese fans, he was just a talented fighter in a weird costume. They were left scratching their heads and waiting for the bout to start. It was as if Schembri and his promoters reasoned that Japanese fans like goofy ring entrances, then picked an inoffensive gimmick and expected people in the arena to go crazy over it.

The only foreign fighter to consistently get it right is Josh Barnett. He's become the standard-bearer for pro wrestling and catch wrestling in MMA. Besides winning lots of high-profile fights, he also fits nicely into that legacy. Much like old catch wrestlers who helped start pro wrestling in Japan, Barnett is often seen training with macebells and suplexing people.

Also, Barnett was a big fan of the Japanese wrestling scene before he became a part of it. That's something that comes across in his interviews and entrances, and it's something that lots of fans here can relate to. In other words, imagine the likable and slightly geeky kid we all knew in high school who was way too into pro wrestling. Now imagine that same kid as one of the biggest, toughest fighters in the world. That's how Barnett comes across in Japan.

When it comes to achieving fame abroad, the only thing a person can be sure of is what won't work. What won't work? Whatever doesn't fit. An American fighter doing ring entrances like Sakuraba will fail to inspire just as surely as a Japanese fighter trash-talking his opponents in broken English would fail to intimidate in the United States. Without some sense of context, there's no way you'll be big anywhere, least of all Japan.

MAKING THE CUT

March 2008

Simpler is better. It's one of those maxims that pop up whenever you're trying to get something done. When problems or solutions start to multiply, remembering to keep things simple helps you focus. It helps you to decide what is strictly necessary and what you can safely ignore.

Scientists and philosophers use a more refined version of this. It's called Occam's razor because it cuts away unnecessary concepts or explanations. It goes something like this: If you have two theories that make the same predictions, the simpler one is better. The classic example is planetary motion. In medieval times, one theory said that the Earth was the center of the universe but that it required a complex model of concentric spheres and epicycles to make it work. The rival theory said that the sun was the center and everything revolved around it. That sun-centered theory also offered a much simpler way to explain the motions of the planets. Both



PHOTO BY RICK HUSTEAD

The reality-based self-defense movement grew from an effort to strip away the elements of the traditional martial arts that are unnecessary in a fight. (For illustrative purposes, John Machado is shown.)

models could account for what the sky was doing, but the simpler one was closer to what we know today.

In the martial arts, there are shades of this kind of thinking. For instance, the *jeet kune do* slogan, “Absorb what is useful, reject what is useless,” is all about shaving off excess techniques. Likewise, the whole reality-based self-defense/military-combatives movement seems based on cutting away any techniques or ideas that aren’t strictly necessary for self-defense. But Occam’s razor is probably most helpful when evaluating paranormal claims in the martial arts—like “*chi* power.”

Some guys claim that they can gather *chi* (life energy), store it in their lower bellies and release it with knockout power in strikes. Some even contend that they can project it like some metaphysical Taser. But the proof that’s often offered doesn’t need a mysterious life energy to account for it. For example, one of my first karate instructors used to clench his fist really tight and slowly go through a few blocks and punches as an intense isotonic exercise. Then he’d open his hand a few inches from my face and ask whether I could feel the *chi*. What I felt was a little heat coming off his hand. Why should anyone call that an occult force when body heat is a much simpler and clearer explanation? The same goes for explaining knockouts as a result of *chi* release instead of simple kinetic energy.

While Occam’s razor can be helpful in the martial arts, it can also be misused. Simple may often be better, but that doesn’t automatically make the simpler theory true. Sometimes complex ideas explain things better. For example, mixed martial artists have spent the past 15 years or so trying to discover which techniques are strictly necessary for winning in the cage. Along the way, they cut away a lot of stuff, thinking that they could safely ignore the cultural trappings and philosophies of the arts. But a simple theory of how to win in the cage doesn’t explain as much as the broad principles of the traditional arts. Can an MMA fighter safely ignore well-worn ideas about what it means to be a warrior in a civil society?

Probably the best answer to that is a version of Occam’s razor that’s usually attributed to Albert Einstein: “Theories should be as simple as possible, but no simpler!” That means you also can’t oversimplify. When you want to explain the martial arts, do it without making any unnecessary assumptions (*chi* power, etc.). But make sure your simple theory is complex enough to explain the arts as a whole.

THE LEGACY OF WEAPONS

April 2008

The martial arts can be divided into two groups: empty-hand arts and weapons arts. There's endless argument within each group about which particular empty-hand or weapon skill is superior—i.e., punching versus grappling or sticks versus blades. But there's general agreement among martial artists that a man with a weapon, regardless of the type of weapon, has a definite advantage over a man without one.

Weapons are better than empty hands for one reason—the ease with which they can hurt another person. In kickboxing matches and bare-knuckle karate tournaments, it often takes a long time for one competitor to knock out another. In many of those fights, both opponents are left standing at the end, and judges must determine the winner. Even no-rules grappling matches often go for 30 minutes or longer before one person triumphs over his opponent. With a stick, knife or gun, however, you can hurt someone worse than you can with your bare hands—and in a shorter time.

The effect of weapons on the development of the martial arts cannot be overstated. The ability to hurt and kill quickly and easily changed the way ancient masters looked at the world. They needed to make life-and-death decisions in the blink of an eye. One slash of a samurai sword or one slice from a poisoned *kris* knife could mean instant death. The old masters became spiritual people because they had no choice: They needed some type of heightened awareness to survive in their chosen profession.

The heightened awareness of the masters usually came from the practice of meditation or some kind of ritual trance. Their methods of altering consciousness were learned from priests or shamans. This is the origin of the influence of Asian religious traditions on the martial arts. Warriors needed an altered state of consciousness to see and react properly to an attack with a blade or other weapon. They needed to judge where a cut or stab was going and react with their own cut almost simultaneously. In other words, swordsmen and knife fighters didn't react (act after) their opponent's strike; they acted at virtually the same time as their opponent struck. That's what is meant by the phrase "becoming one with your enemy."

Priests and shamans were important to warriors for another reason, too. Having strong religious beliefs lent reason to the warriors' actions. Knowing that what they were doing was right took away the doubt that causes hesitation. Remember that one slip could mean the end of a life. Warriors in ancient times needed the context of firm religious beliefs to

keep their consciences clear and themselves alive.

The presence of meditative traditions in the empty-hand martial arts is a carry-over from the weapons arts. The empty hand is simply not as dangerous as a stick or sword. In fact, many ancient masters taught empty-hand skills (along with meditation) first and weapons skills second because the empty hand is less dangerous. That way, it was easier to contain a student who turned on his master. A student with empty-hand skills is no match for a master of weapons skills. As Niccolo Machiavelli wrote, “Between an armed man and an unarmed man, there is no comparison.”

Today, we live in a much safer world. Most of us lead relatively quiet and uneventful lives. There are no duels of honor with swords or knives. We have no practical reason to seek the altered consciousness of the ancient masters. For this reason, the traditional martial arts seem like hopeless anachronisms. But there is something present that’s not easily dismissed.

By learning the exact movements of ancient warriors, we gain an insight into a way of thinking that’s obscured by the comfort of modern life. We can’t truly know what it’s like to fight a life-and-death battle unless we’ve done so. We can only taste what it’s like to be a warrior through *kata* practice and sport-fighting competitions. Even in those distilled forms, we can still experience the great mystery of the old masters—specifically, the quiet mind from which their great skills came.

KICKING HEADS AND MAKING FRIENDS

May 2008

When people think of a fight gym, they often imagine an atmosphere of seething anger. They see a bunch of lost souls, hardened members of the underclass barely keeping their fury under control. They picture tattooed muscleheads who don’t really like each other but maintain an uneasy truce so they can satisfy their urge to beat on someone without getting arrested.

By contrast, *dojo* are often seen as friendly, middle-class environments. It doesn’t matter whether your aim is fitness, competition or self-defense. Martial arts training halls are generally seen as oases of cooperation and support in an otherwise over-competitive society. You learn something martial and make friends, and nobody gets hurt.

What these two points of view have in common is they usually exist only outside of fight gyms and *dojo*. Go into any gym and you’ll probably find a

lot more outgoing, friendly guys than ruthless loners. In fact, you'll probably encounter more and stronger friendships among fighters than among athletes in most other sports. Sure, some thugs and criminals gravitate toward the fight game, but most combat athletes are more like the boys who get into fistfights in school and then become best friends.

As for martial arts training halls, the cooperation and support we expect are more ideal than automatic. Even the friendliest dojo has to deal with petty intra-school rivalries and backbiting. It doesn't matter whether it's *aikido* or army combatives—personal differences often lead to discontent and acrimony, regardless of how much everyone cherishes the idea of cooperation.

Really, the open secret of all fight-sport and martial arts schools is that they are more alike than different. Sure, the styles of fighting can be drastically different, but brands and styles don't affect the basic truth of what emerges when people get together and practice combat skills. Discontent and differences naturally arise and then get straightened out on the practice floor, and that shared ordeal paradoxically fosters friendship and cooperation. The harder the training and the worse the ordeal, the deeper the friendship becomes.

Of course, some dojo aren't very intense. Some have a mild, hobbyist-oriented atmosphere. Friendship and cooperation are just assumed from the beginning, like one step in a 12-step program. But this isn't an example of martial arts devolving into group therapy. It's an echo of a time when the arts were more intense and vital. Belief in that kind of camaraderie emerged naturally from the tough, challenging dojo environments of the past. The fact that it's carried on as a tradition in less intense training makes it a difference in degree of camaraderie, not type.

What you see when you visit a kickboxing or mixed-martial arts gym is the other end of the continuum. Those guys may seem like dangerous lunatics to the average martial artist, but they're generally just as safety conscious and considerate as any hobbyist. The main difference is that they're more enthusiastic about testing the limits of their potential than the average guy is. They want to be as strong, as fast and as skilled as they can, so they develop bodies, attitudes and skills in the gym that may seem extreme. But again, it's more a difference in degree than type. What a fighting athlete does is basically the same as what most casual martial artists do. They're kicking heads and making friends.

So the next time you meet someone at the opposite end of the martial spectrum, try to resist the urge to pigeonhole him. We may seem like nutty

extremophiles and casual weekend warriors to each other, but we're all on the same page. What's important is that we've found something compelling in the practice of the fighting arts, and that makes us all potential friends.

MARTIAL ARTS FATHERS

June 2008

In February, my wife gave birth to our first child, a healthy baby boy. Like most first-time parents, I looked at that helpless little bundle and felt a powerful mix of joy and responsibility. I imagined all the promise and dangers of life and how I'll help my child through them. Next, I started thinking about how he'll see me and what kind of person I'll be in his eyes. What will he think of his martial arts dad?

It doesn't matter what my kid grows up to be. He might be a martial artist, or he might give the arts a miss altogether. As long as I'm into them, that'll define my child's perceptions of me. When he's an adult, he'll remember the yellowing paper rank certificates hung on the wall and the dusty tournament trophies that seemed like relics. He'll relate stories about my matches and my words of fight wisdom to his friends, maybe with reverence and maybe with irony. He might see me as a wise guru, a driven athlete, a dedicated artist or just a weirdo hobbyist. But if I spend a lot of my free time doing the martial arts, that's who I'll be to him.

So if I'm destined to be a martial arts dad, the question is, What kind should I be? There are as many answers as there are martial artists with kids, but there are some well-worn truths to be learned from other people's examples.

One truth seems to have a dual function as a general parenting guideline: Be authoritative, not authoritarian. Authoritative parents can be demanding and set limits, but they give reasons for both and are open to discussing them with their children. These kinds of parents permit a certain amount of autonomy, both allowing and expecting their children to develop their own thoughts and opinions. Authoritarian parents, on the other hand, require conformity and obedience. They set rules that must be followed and high standards that must be met, both without question. When children balk, authoritarian parents see it as a moral failure that has to be corrected, often through physical punishment.

Authoritative parents are the kind you usually see in a good training hall. They love the martial arts and bring their children because they show an

interest. They encourage them in practice and help heal bruised egos when they fail, but they don't allow the kids to give up because of failure.

A good example of this comes from heavyweight boxing champ Evander Holyfield's childhood. Holyfield wanted to quit boxing because he lost to a boy who was better than him. Holyfield's mother said he could quit, but only after he beat that boy. Of course, that motivated Holyfield to get better, and he avenged his loss. But once he won, the future champ didn't want to quit boxing anymore. Even in middle age, Holyfield still acknowledges that incident as the point at which he learned the perseverance that made him one of the greatest fighters of all time.

Authoritarian parents are seen less often these days. They carry the harsh military style of training into parenting. They're the people you hear shrieking at their kids like drill sergeants. They force them into training and expect gratitude for it. Many berate them in front of others when they fail. Some even slap them or hit them with *shinai* (bamboo swords) when they get stances or techniques wrong. It's a style of training and parenting that's thankfully being abandoned. It may occasionally produce good fighters, but it almost always turns young people into bitter and cruel adults.

Another basic truth is that a good martial arts dad doesn't do it alone. He's usually part of a community of martial artists that give the kid context and support. Whatever the style, you need many people to work with and use as models for how to do things. If you have only your father to compare and contrast yourself with, it's limiting. More important, though, is the perspective on your art/life and the support that come from interacting with a group. It's pretty hard to simultaneously be a training partner, coach and critic for your kid. In extended networks like those of *kenpo* and kung fu, a child can find his way in the martial arts without being suffocated by his father's presence.

Probably the No. 1 truth for every martial arts dad is simply that your kid isn't you. He may be curious about the arts for a while or just practice a little for your approval, but they may not be his thing. And that's OK. My father loved boxing and baseball because they were the only major pro sports when he was growing up. But in the 1980s, I got caught up in "Japan mania" and became more interested in judo. So he had to give up his fantasies of me playing baseball and find out what this crazy, Oriental jacket-wrestling was all about.

While holding my son in my arms for the first time, I had my own fantasies about his future. I imagined him winning international judo tournaments or being a mixed-martial arts champ. Only time will tell what kind

of person he'll be, but mostly I just want him to see me as a good father. In the end, we help our kids become who they are, not who we are. Martial arts or not, that's the best kind of dad I can be.



PHOTO BY RICK HUSTEAD

Martial arts dad Ernie Reyes Sr. and his daughter, Destiny.