

Everything I Need to Know I Learned While Being Kicked in the Face:

My Philosophical Musings Regarding
Tae Kwon Do Presented as a set of
Conversations between a Fictitious Martial
Artist and his Instructor

A paper by Bert Hargrave submitted to Masters John Rankin and Doug O'Hara
For the rank of second degree black belt

“Every muscle is inclined to an action. To exert your body to its fullest potential of motion is to fulfill its purpose. This is what you have been called to do. As you sit in front of a screen playing video games, that sedentary mass connected to your dexterous thumbs is crying out. It is calling you to action. Tae Kwon Do will challenge you to do things you may not have thought were possible.” Kwan Jang Nim interrupted his speech to correct a student’s side kick technique. We were doing basics in unison to the count called out by the lead student. He continued, “But you must honor the calling with your effort and dedication to the task. Is there nothing more beautiful than a perfectly-executed side kick? And should you not feel shame when you have the ability to reach that level of perfection but you choose instead to let your mind wander and let your foot drop?” Yes, some of us felt shame. “Likewise, for your mind to reach its potential it must be stretched, challenged, and tested also. Each one of you has a purpose, and a potentiality. Find it.” He just neglected to tell us how long that would take. This is one of the earliest speeches I can remember from my Tae Kwon Do master. At the time, it was just a meaningless collection of words, one of many lectures which adults are always delivering and to which children become numb. But I remembered it nevertheless. It wasn’t until later that I understood it.

I also remember the first time I had the courage to ask a question. It was during the practice breaking session before my second test. During my first breaking class I had heard him explain why we bow to the boards before and after breaking them. But it all seemed a bit silly to me.

“So, we bow to the board because it was once alive?” I began, demonstrating that I had heard his answer. “Then we shouldn’t have to bow to a patio stone, right? It was never alive.”

“How do you know it was never alive? Have you never seen a fossil? It is a rock that was once alive. Don’t you know that the atoms of which your body is now composed are constantly being exchanged with atoms outside your body? These too will one day disperse and become other things – trees, rocks, and rivers. The blood that flows through you once flowed through the veins of the largest dinosaurs. The air you breathe once filled the lungs of Socrates, Sun Tzu, and Benjamin Franklin.”

“When you put it that way,” I replied, “There’s no difference between a board, a brick, or a person. Should I then bow to everything, or maybe bow to nothing at all? Where do you draw the line?” He smiled and nodded as though to accept my question as its own answer.

“Albert Einstein said that one can look at life as though everything is a miracle or as though nothing is. Do not think too hard about what is worthy of your bow versus what is not worthy. It isn’t about the brick or the board. It’s about you. When you bow to someone, you are addressing that person with respect, addressing that person as ‘Thou’. You are not changing that person, but you are effecting a change in your perspective. If you then expand your perspective to include the world around you – boards, stones, all that – you address the world around you as ‘Thou’ rather than ‘it’. And that changes you. That is why we bow.”

“Why should I need to change?” I asked from an arrogance typical of youth. “I am made of the same atoms that were once part of the greatest thinkers and warriors the world has ever known.”

“Yes, and you are also made of the same atoms that were once part of the greatest jackasses, literally and metaphorically.”

After that exchange, I realized that the old guy just might be on to something. So I kept my ears open for additional nuggets of wisdom. That’s when I overheard this conversation between Kwan Jang Nim and a new student.

“I’ve already been in trouble for fighting, so how is teaching me to fight going to keep me out of trouble?”

“Why were you fighting?”

“Because I was angry.”

“So, what’s the connection between anger and fighting?”

“I don’t know. I just did it.”

“For many people, anger leads directly to violence. It’s a natural reaction. You were wounded by words, and you fought back. But instead of using words to retaliate, you used your fists. It’s the wild animal nature within you that took control. But we are not wild like hyenas or wolves. We are civilized people. When we spar here in the

dojang, we do not do it out of anger. You are not fighting because you hate your opponent and want to hurt him. You fight to demonstrate and improve your skill, and your sparring opponent helps you in doing that. Over time, as you fight in the dojang, you will separate the will to fight from the emotion of anger. So the end result is that fighting is not your first reaction when you become angry. This, I hope, will be the first step in keeping you out of trouble.”

Of course, I had my own anger problems back then. There was this one time we were sparring. At the time I hated sparring, especially against the higher-ranking students. After twenty minutes I was tired and frustrated. I was trying to use proper Tae Kwon Do technique, but nothing seemed to work. Every time I started my round kick, not only was it comparatively slow, but also my lead arm went up for balance. This left my guard open and attracted a lot of punches and kicks to the stomach. Finally I had had enough. We were not allowed to punch to the face, but I saw an opening and swung hard. He looked annoyed at first. Maybe he thought it was a mistake. But I didn't stop there. I threw another, and another until it drew some blood from around his mouth. That's when I felt a force grab the back of my collar and pull me out of that match.

“Anger!” he said sternly. “With your anger you have disgraced this class. You have turned a sparring match into a personal act of reprisal. Do you want to be a black belt some day?” I was still panting hard, but I answered, “Yes,” through my clenched jaw and gritted teeth.

“If you really do, you must first become a martial artist. The task of a martial artist is to participate in the trials of life decently, in the spirit of nature, not in the spirit of personal malice or revenge.” He then pointed to the Korean flag and asked, “Do you know what that symbol is in the center of the flag?”

I shrugged.

“That is you and your sparring partner. You are two elements of the same whole. That is you and your opponent, yin and yang. He was once you, struggling with his sparring technique. You will one day be him, teaching those of lower rank. Sparring is a harmonious relationship made of the interaction between two individuals. Without the two participants it would not exist. Without your opponent you would be incomplete.

That is what I mean by the spirit of nature. When you instead relate to the world in the spirit of egotism and malevolence, then malevolence is what you will find for yourself. Now, sit against the wall, meditate on this and find your center.”

Well, I didn’t know what most of that meant, except for the part about sitting against the wall. So I did that. At first I watched the other students sparring, but soon I was letting my thoughts wander back to my own sparring matches. Maybe the scowl on my face betrayed my thoughts, or maybe it was the whispered swearing under my breath. But somehow he could tell that I was not the shining example of serenity characteristic of one lost in meditation.

“You’re too demanding,” he said. “Yes, unrealistic demands upon oneself. I’ve seen it take down many a student, more often than a swift kick to the head.”

“*I must win,*” he exclaimed in a manner imitating the voice of my guiding will. “I absolutely have to fight well! Because if I don’t, I cannot stand it! It is unfair and *intolerable* that I cannot perform according to my demands!”

“Sound familiar?” he asked. “This is what you’re telling yourself. And where did you ever get such an idea? Where is it written that you will do the absolute best all the time?”

“But I want to win!” I protested.

“Yes, of course you would like to win. But you don’t have to. Does everyone win all the time? By no means. But what is winning?”

“Winning is when I don’t fail.”

“And what is failure?”

“When I don’t get what I want.”

“OK then, think about the times when you don’t get what you want. Those times when you are hit with a hard blow to the solar plexus, that is your instruction.”

“Yes I know,” I responded drearily. “Because it’s teaching me to block and to keep my guard up, and if I don’t learn to do that now, then I won’t be prepared for a real fight.”

“That is only the first layer of the instruction. The real lesson is suffering.”

“I don’t see any lesson from a pain in the stomach that makes me want to throw up.”

“Your pain is where your life is. The pain you endure when sparring, you do it to yourself.”

“No I didn’t! *He’s* the one who kicked *me*,” I replied as I pointed to my last sparring partner.

“*You* came to class today. *You* put on your pads to spar. You may find this difficult to accept, but you are the ultimate cause of your own suffering.” He was right, I didn’t accept that at all. “So why would you do all of this to yourself?” he asked with a rhetorical tone. “Because deep down inside you, you know that the greater the suffering you can endure, the greater the person you will become. Now all you have to do is to accept that truth, and you will be the creator of your own life, instead of an unwilling passenger.” So, what does it mean to be the creator of my own life, my own destiny? It was something I had never before pondered.

“Why do we spend so much time doing forms?” I blurted out one day. “When will I ever get into a fight choreographed like a capital I? Where is the practicality in this?”

“It is tradition,” he responded. “People have been doing these forms for hundreds of years.”

“Has any one of those people ever stopped to ask why?”

“Why do we have traditions? Why do we wear traditional clothing? Why do we enact the ritual behavior of the past? Is that what you want to know?”

“Hmm,” I pondered. “Yes, I think that covers it.”

“What do you think of immortality?” he asked me. If I didn’t know better I would have thought he was dodging the question. So I just shrugged and listened to his answer. “For ancient Greeks, the river Styx was the river of immortality. If a person were to swim in the river, he would become immortal. There’s quite a bit of truth to that. Imagine a river flowing through time instead of through a valley. This river is our tradition. At its source are the founders of Tae Kwon Do. Downstream, each subsequent generation wears the uniforms and participates in the forms. Its waters are kept flowing when students become teachers, and teachers become masters. You have now immersed yourself in this river. You will learn what has been handed down to you, then you will

teach it to others. They will keep the waters flowing long after you have gone. In this way, you have become immortal. Does that answer your question?" I nodded and continued practicing my forms.

There was a tournament some time after that last exchange. I had initially signed up because everyone else was doing it. But it was hosted at a different school, so the people would be unfamiliar and the etiquette slightly different. I arrived early and watched the matches scheduled before my own was to start. Two students faced each other on the mat. At the starting kiah they charged at each other fiercely. "That yelling!" I thought to myself. We don't yell so much in our school. "And the brutality!" I continued thinking. Just look at how ferociously they strike. When it was over, each contestant had to wipe at small amounts of blood oozing from cuts. My confidence was diminishing. The following match was no more gentle. In fact, with each succeeding fight, the knot in my stomach grew tighter. Soon it would be my turn, but I could not imagine going through with it. I started for the exit, but Kwan Jan Nim halted me before I could leave.

"Where are you going?" he asked. I couldn't face him directly.

"I need to leave now. I can't do this."

"Why? Are you afraid?"

"Yes," I wasn't ashamed to admit it. "Yes, I'm afraid. Now, just let me go home."

"No," he replied as he grabbed my arm. "You must do this. It's very important. This is where you will find your center."

"In there?" I asked incredulously. "If that's where my center is, I don't want to go get it. Let it stay there."

"The center is within you. But it will come into being only when you are fearless and desireless. That is the burning point in yourself. When you have no desire for the outcome of the match, no desire even for your life. No fear of being hurt, no fear even of death. That is the condition of the martial artist going into a sparring match."

It is also the condition of the businessman going into a lecture hall to make a presentation to the board of directors, the student going into the classroom for final exams, or the lover going into the institution of marriage. If not, then it should be. At least that's what I have told myself on those occasions. I learned in the dojang how to find meaning in the seemingly routine, and I have translated that to the world outside. So I have made my life into a poem. It is a metaphor in which every mundane act has a grander significance. Am I living an illusion, or am I just *living*?