



Zen and the Way of the Warrior

Many people have asked over the years how Zen Buddhism became so intimately linked with the Samurai, the Martial Arts, and Bushido (“the Way of the Warrior”). Bushido does not mean the way of the aggressor. Bushido might be better translated as “the way of life with dignity,” where dignity implies the most sincere faithfulness and deepest possible benevolence. At the core of Bushido, Zen, and the Martial Arts is the readiness to live a life of dignity and integrity to the fullest extent possible. To face life thoroughly, one must be able to surrender unhesitatingly to each moment. Giving everything in each moment means, on a fundamental level, being prepared to die in each moment. Only by waging battle for interior mastery can anyone hope to become unrestrictedly prepared for life and death.

What do Zen, the martial arts and “the Way of the Warrior” have in common? First they all squarely face the impermanence of life. Though we do not often allow our fragile mortality to be uppermost in our consciousness; nevertheless, this breath may be our last. The Apostle Paul said “I die daily.” Zen teachers extol their students to “die on your cushion,” and one of the greatest Japanese swordsmen Tsukahara Bokuden (1490-1572) said:

*For the samurai to learn
There's one thing only,
One last thing--
To face death unflinchingly.*

A warrior in battle faces death at any moment, and therefore knows, perhaps as well as anyone, the immediacy and preciousness of life. Of course, each of us consciously or unconsciously faces a life and death battle in every heart beat and in every breath.

If, without the benefit of self-delusions, we were constantly aware of our own mortality, we would more likely be compassionate to ourselves and others.

To be the most effective in battle the warrior must “master” fear. Fear is an internal response to a perceived threat. No one is free of fear; in fact, to be fearless would be a great hindrance, just as no one would in their right mind want to be incapable of feeling physical pain. Only by feeling pain can we be informed of what hurts. Only by feeling fear can we be informed of what we need to be vigilant about. To “master” fear requires that the warrior, martial artist, student of Zen, or any human hoping to be fully alive and aware, must first clearly and cleanly feel fear (or any feeling or sensation) directly and proportionally to the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

To feel cleanly and clearly is in itself a tremendous accomplishment. We are all born with this talent; an infant completely feels just what is, nothing less, nothing more. However, as we grow older we naturally build defenses and develop delusions that “protect” us from feeling the vicissitudes of life so keenly. Our own defenses, delusions, ideas, concepts and attitudes then complicate our perception of what is, and either dilutes or amplifies our feelings and sensations disproportional to actual circumstances. For a warrior, or anyone hoping to live life fully, these distorted or confused perceptions can become a major impediment.

So, the first step in mastering fear is to become free of distorted or confused perceptions arising from our own personal history or inattentiveness. This step is so much easier said than done. It can take years of determined effort to partially unscramble our perceptions and free ourselves to observe life just as it is. The prolonged concerted effort that leads to “self” mastery

and takes years to reach fruition is called practice.

Practice can take many forms. In Zen, there is sitting practice (zazen), walking practice (kinhin), and working practice (samu). In Aikido, there is the way of harmony with one’s core natural power. In the art of serving tea, there is Cha-no-yo, a ceremony that is said to open one to the spirit of harmonious blending of Heaven and Earth and provide the means for establishing universal peace. For the samurai there was Bushido, and in most indigenous cultures around the world there has been the “warrior’s journey,” demarcated by recurrent concentrated periods of practice (i.e. battle, dance or vision quests). All these forms of practice slowly and steadily break down the defenses and delusions that distort our perceptions and restore clean, clear, attentive observation to things as they are.

Much of practice is dedicated to being present right where we are, here and now. In zazen (seated meditation) one learns or re-learns to be aware of each breath, thought, feeling and sensation as it arises. Practitioners listen gently yet attentively to the sound of the wind, rain, bird-song, external “traffic,” or internal “noise.” Whatever arises is noticed with as little judgment, analysis or discrimination as possible. Slowly, very slowly, the Zen student develops the capacity to just sit, just breathe, just be here and now, independent of likes and dislikes.

In Zen practice, kinhin is interspersed between long periods of sitting. During walking meditation we just walk, just take each step as it comes. Once, as infants, we fully appreciated the mystery of each breath; once as toddlers, we fully realized the majesty of each step. Often my Zen group holds sesshins (5-8 day concentrated

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periods of practice to face one's true heart/mind, kokoro) at Camp Indianola on the Kitsap peninsula, along the shores of Puget Sound. When the weather permits, we do our kinhin outdoors in the forest along the nearby wetlands, or on the beach. Occasionally, when walking slowly along the beach, we

will file past a Great Blue Heron. These stately water birds have very long legs, and when they walk in the shallow water, any observer will be moved by the naturalness and dignity of their steps. When doing kinhin I try to allow the same kind of naturalness to appear in my steps by letting go of all preconceived ideas of right and wrong, and just walking, just accepting each step of my physical form.

According to Genki Roshi, samu is more important than zazen for helping Zen students to awaken to "Blue Sky Mind." Working meditation mainly consists of cleaning and preparing meals. Cleaning activities are usually sweeping, washing bowls and mopping floors. In Japan, the monks mop all the wooden floors of the temple each day by running a damp towel along the surfaces with their hands, back and forth, in bare feet, running in a low squat. When I trained in a Zen temple in Japan, during the autumn and winter of 1981-82, the monks spent the majority of most days sweeping the gravel garden paths around the temple. While sweeping, it was not our goal to pick up every leaf, but to foster a sense of gentle, attended naturalness, where each path would blend naturally into its surroundings. While working, Zen students are encouraged to develop mindfulness towards the activity at hand, remaining as fully present as possible to what needs doing.

Once the famous Rinzai Zen Master Joshu (778-897) was petitioned by a sincere monk to be taught the deepest of Zen truths. Joshu replied first with a question;

"Have you had your breakfast?" The monk replied affirmatively. "Then wash your bowls," responded Joshu, implying with both his question and statement that the deepest Zen truth is to "learn" how to spontaneously meet the circumstances of life and do what needs doing. Ordinary life is the enlightened life, when hungry eat, after breakfast wash your bowls. Fortunately, this particular monk "got it" and had an insight.



All of these practices arising out of Zen training, the martial arts, the way of tea, or other cultural contexts have the effect of slowly returning the practitioner to a direct, pristine natural awareness of things just as they are and developing an underlining readiness to respond to circumstances as they arise. These qualities of awareness and readiness are essential for a warrior, or for anyone wanting to live life fully. Earlier I quoted sword master Bokuden's verse for the samurai, D.T. Suzuki in his book *Zen and Japanese Culture* also relates the following anecdote about Bokuden:

He had three sons, who were all trained in swordsmanship. He wanted to test their attainments. He placed a little pillow over the curtain at the entrance to his room, and it was so arranged that a slight touch on the curtain, when it was raised upon entering, would make the pillow fall right on one's head.

Bokuden called in the eldest son first. When he approached he noticed the pillow on the curtain, so he took it down, and af-

ter entering he placed it back in the original position. The second son was now called in. He touched the curtain to raise it, and as soon as he saw the pillow coming down, he caught it in his hands, and then carefully put it back where it had been. It was the third son's turn to touch the curtain. He came in brusquely, and the pillow fell right on his neck. But he cut it in two with his sword even before it came down on the floor. Bokuden passed his judgment: "Eldest son, you are well qualified for swordsmanship." So saying, he gave him a sword. To the second son he said, "Train yourself yet assiduously." But the youngest son Bokuden most severely reproved...

Bokuden was not interested in the skills developed as a byproduct of practice, but in the deep awareness and readiness that flows into human dignity, integrity and compassion.



Mastering fear first requires regaining a clear, clean, undisturbed view of things just as they are. As we have seen, this is not easy to come by, requiring years of practice that focuses on heightening awareness and fostering readiness. One of the most profound and tenacious distortions of clear perception is our own ego (that constellation of names, beliefs, attitudes, judgments, likes, dislikes, roles, fantasies and character types that makes up our sense of personal identity). Actually, it is not so much our ego that is the problem, but our attachment to the belief that our ego is "me." Awareness of "self" is a profound gift of the human condition, it is

also one of our biggest liabilities.

Rocks, trees, stars and most animals are not bothered by self-awareness, and these manifestations of the universe move naturally and freely in their course, as naturally as water running downhill. We humans, on the other hand, become easily confused about which way is up. Perceiving clearly without distortion is crucial, but even if we are perceiving the world relatively clearly, because we are very complex, self-perceiving creatures it is easy to become stuck or favor one set of sensations over another. Most often we become stuck on our "self."

The second step in mastering fear is learning (or relearning) how to let go, i.e., how to let go of all sensations as they arise in our consciousness without getting "stuck" or "fixated" on any of them. From the Eastern perspective, anything that can be perceived or observed is a kind of mental sensation; hence, a thought, feeling, physical sensation, hope, desire, dream, fantasy, insight, or even one's self-perception can be viewed as a kind of mental sensation. Whenever our mind rests, stops or ruminates on one kind of sensation it is no longer free to observe or respond to everything, everywhere. In a life and death situation, having one's mind stuck on one sensation, or one constellation of sensations can be very detrimental. As we know, each breath can be our last, so if our mind is even temporarily stuck here or there we are not free to be of benefit to either "self" or "other than self."

Fear and anxiety are a kind of barometer of how stuck we are. When fear and anxiety are on the rise we can be pretty sure that one's mind has become stuck or attached to something. Instead of viewing increasing fear and anxiety as our enemy, it is far more useful to view these sensations as an ally which signals that we have become stuck on something and that it is time to let go. In this way, the view develops that increasing fear and anxiety are the symptoms of a stuck mental system; in addition, from this perspective, the amount of fear and anxiety present can be viewed as the requisite "heat" or "pressure" necessary to free the system and get the mind flowing freely again.

As we all know, it is really easy to become stuck on our "self." It is very difficult to face death, or fully face life, when we are attached to keeping our sense of an abiding self. Nothing is fixed, everything is in flux; yet, most humans never develop beyond a fixated (read stuck, limited, broken, i.e., neurotic) sense of self. Why? How is this so? There are many theories, but Western psychology has gone far in elucidating the many developmental pitfalls that we all face during the natural maturation process into adulthood.

For whatever reasons, our culture and time are very poorly suited to fostering smooth free-flowing human development. I sincerely believe that ancient indigenous and aboriginal cultures were better at it than we are today. Nevertheless, it is easy to understand that as very intricate creatures our early development is both fragile and crucial. Yet, because we are so intricate, we are very adaptable creatures who learn how to compensate for many early losses.

Humans are susceptible throughout our lifetime of acquiring what Carl Jung called "complexes," closed, fixed loops of ideas, hopes and desires in response to some perceived loss, lack or wrong. In early childhood when we are the most vulnerable, children may develop severe complexes that hold deeply conflicted hopes and desires for un-met, disallowed or traumatized needs in patterns of convoluted thoughts, ideals, dreams and fantasies. In other words, complexes compensate for losses by holding them in abeyance, a kind of unconscious limbo or homeostasis. When key developmental needs are not adequately met, complexes arise weighing us down and fostering a stuck, fixed, abiding sense of self that becomes progressively incapable of freely flowing with circumstances as they arise. If the magnitude of the complexes becomes caustic enough, then the self-system begins to split or disintegrate into more or less discreet sub-systems starting with idealized and vilified fixed images of who we are (or who others are).

Because complexes are more or less unconscious manifestations of our psyche, we may never become aware of them until

a particularly stressful environment draws them out producing some kind of imbalance, dis-order, or dis-ease. One "wonderful" aspect of practice is that in its concentrated form during a sesshin (Zen retreat), Aikido test, high tea ceremony, a battle, a dance or a vision quest, we are exposed to high levels of stress, and these stresses bring our complexes to the surface one by one. Through practice we come face to face with our developmental and psychological shortcomings. Anyone who has trained at any "deep art" has had to face themselves in ways they never imagined. Facing ourselves is what concentrated periods of practice are all about.

Through training and practice our mostly unconscious shortcomings, our stuck, incomplete developmental patterns start to become self-evident; they become painfully conscious. With this painful expanded consciousness, comes a dawning understanding of where we have come from, and what we need to be about now. If over many years of time, one's practice doesn't feel like it is leading to a complete transformation by occasionally "scaring the shit out of you," then it is probably not rigorous enough.

In the course of deeply dedicated training, each of us will likely face one or more "dark nights of the soul" where nearly all seems lost in a morass of dark, conflicted



confusion. A dark night indicates that a practitioner has uncovered a core complex. When in a dark night, one really feels the

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complexity of the complex. If you have ever been here you know what I'm talking about. I have definitely been here and I can tell you that it is not fun. Yet, I can also offer some hope. A dark night really is "pay dirt!" There is a way to turn this morass of heavy material into gold. To do so, the person facing the dark night must become a warrior of mythic proportions. It is time to do "battle" with the demons of shame, self-doubt, judgment, self-deprecation, greed and hate that always seem to arise. As warriors we must learn not to be fooled by these demon aspects of ourselves. When I sit with psychotherapy clients in my practice, there is a small statue that I look at all day of the Bodhisattva Manjusri. He holds a sword in one hand and a sutra (Buddhist scripture) in the other. Manjusri's sword is not used to kill anyone, but to dispel delusions. The sutra he holds mirrors and illuminates truth.

The best way to meet these demons or "enemies" on the field of battle is to turn them into our "allies." If we make them our teachers then we can not help but "win." Aikido students know that the best way to "defeat" the "enemy" (i.e. partner initiating the attack or uke) is to gently allow and firmly encourage the energy of the attacker to neutralize itself. This is what we must do with our own interior demons. Yagyū Tajima no kami Munenori (1571-1646), another of Japan's great swordsmen told his students that the desire to get rid of whatever disease one is infected with can become an obsession that makes a slave of the student. He says,

Let yourself go with the disease, be with it, keep company with it: this is the way to get rid of it.

In Zen, we take the four Bodhisattva vows. During a sesshin we repeat them at least nine times a day. The first vow is to be of benefit to all sentient beings; to slay or be slain by the demonic aspects of ourselves will not do. The second vow says that we will relinquish all self-delusions; there are no greater delusions than the demons that arise out of the dark night. The third vow says that the number of gates to truth are immeasurable; therefore, every

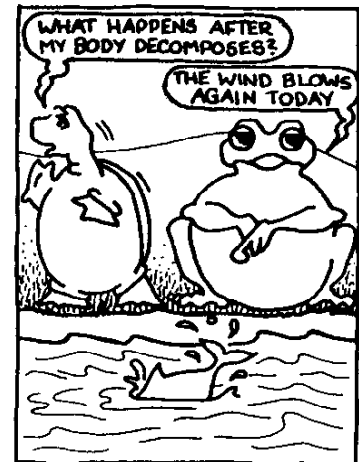
aspect of the universe is to become our teacher. The last vow acknowledges our complete faith in the Buddhist path; implying that we will walk it unto death.

When we accept our own interior demons as our allies they show us their true colors. The judgmental demons show us how they arose as defenders to protect us from external criticism or abuse. We realize that we could protect ourselves from perceived threats of annihilation or abandonment by annihilating or abandoning our externally unwanted or unacceptable aspects before anyone else could. By witnessing and naming, rather than angrily blaming and judging ourselves or others, we neutralize our demons. When they are neutralized we will touch the lost, rejected, stuck (obsessive, compulsive, greedy, needy) parts of ourselves by feeling the pain of their long absence. With the battle field cleared in this way, the stage is set for our wounded aspects to express themselves. This can become a whole new drama, but with firm, compassionate care, our repressed aspects can slowly integrate with our self-system, freeing the self-system of "hang-ups" or fixations, finally unknitting the complex. I warn any of you spiritual warriors out there, this takes a lot of tenacious patience. The caring for the stuck or repressed parts of ourselves is a lot like suddenly becoming foster-care parents of abused, abandoned, totally untrusting children.

No one can face an internal or external battle for you, but there is no good reason to do it alone, especially before you, yourself have become a master. (On one level, becoming a master means dropping the barriers between self and others so that you are never alone, and on another level means being always alone.) This is why we train with teachers and other practitioners. It is not in your self-interest or the interest of the community to have any shame in this, yet many do. Letting go of this shame is crucial for gaining true humility and true dignity. If you have the opportunity to train full-time in a Zendo or Dojo, take it, life is short. If you do not have the opportunity to practice one "deep-art" full-time for many years, I advise that you put together a package or network of several practices that can inte-

grate with your daily life, so that your life, just as it is, turns into a full-time practice.

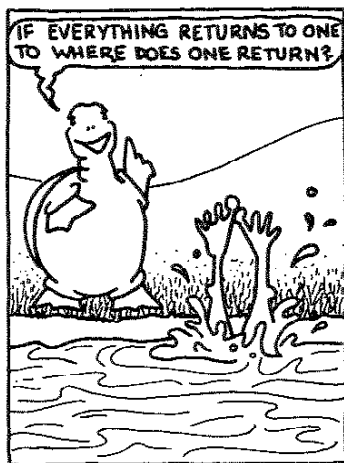
I have a practice that includes one hour of zazen daily, four week-long sesshins a year, and around an average of three extra hours of zazen on the weekends. Even after twenty years of training, this schedule does not include enough time with my Zen master, or enough concentrated time on my own to adequately turn my daily life into a full-time practice; therefore, I supplement my formal training with various mindfulness practices, most especially two hours of psychotherapy a week with a master therapist. I seem to have a rich self-system full of complexes, so my interior practice requires this attention. If I was more completely immersed in Zen training perhaps no additional support would be necessary. Probably all of my dark nights could be contained and resolved within a monastic practice. Yet, I know of several people who powerfully combine Zen practice, Aikido training, and psychotherapy with a "modern" daily life.



As one's self-system becomes unglued and unstuck, it becomes more capable to naturally and spontaneously respond to the environment without flinching, without holding back, and without giving more than is needed in a given situation. It seems odd, but for all our arduous and skillful training, the aim of any deep-art is to bring the practitioner to "beginner's mind." A beginner has no pretensions of being an expert, nothing to lose and everything to gain by putting one's all into the activity at hand. A beginner tends to bring

a fresh response to any new activity. D.T. Suzuki puts it this way:

To state it in terms of swordsmanship the genuine beginner knows nothing about the way of holding and managing the sword, and much less of his concern for himself. When the opponent tries to strike him, he instinctively parries it. This is all he can do. But as soon as the training starts, he is taught how to handle the sword, where to keep the mind, and many other technical tricks -- which makes his mind "stop" at various junctures. For this reason whenever he tries to strike the opponent he feels unusually hampered; [he has lost altogether the original sense of innocence and freedom]. But as days and years go by, as his training acquires fuller maturity, his bodily attitude and his way of managing the sword advance toward "no-mind-ness" which resembles the state of mind he had at the very beginning of training when he knew nothing, when he was altogether ignorant of the art. The beginning and the end thus turn into next-door neighbors.... In a similar way, when the highest stage is reached in the study of Buddhist teaching, a [person] turns into a kind of simpleton who knows nothing of Buddha, nothing of his teaching, and is devoid of all learning or scholarly acquisitions.



Comics by Francesca Sundsten

When Zen talks about beginner's mind it is referring to one's original untarnished nature, where mind is free to flow without hindrance and "stops" nowhere. There is nothing wrong with thinking, analysis, or fine discrimination, but, as we all know, taking even an instant to "think" during a

response will degrade its naturalness immensely. If while serving in tennis I think about my serve, I almost always double fault. Yes, we want to respond to life with the skill of an adult, but the spontaneity and naturalness of an infant.

In Zen, a mind that is not stuck on anything and ready to meet everything (including our last breath) is called the Mind of No-Mind or Mushin. From the Buddhist perspective a "self" free of attachment to personal identity or personal history is called "No-self" (Anatta in Sanskrit), and it represents the highest assimilation of the Buddha's teaching. For the Mind of No-Mind fear has no opportunity to become debilitating. For fear to become a hindrance, the mind would have to "stop" and ruminate. Fear or anxiety that arises in a mind that maintains Mushin is absorbed so smoothly that it produces a natural, useful vigilance to see and act as circumstances warrant.

Soto Zen Master Dogen (1200-1253) is famous for saying:

*To study the Way
[Zen, martial arts, tea, flowers...]
is to study the self.*

To study the self is to forget the self.

To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things.

To be enlightened by all things is to remove the barriers between one's self and others.

How wondrous: when tired sleep, when hungry eat, after breakfast wash your bowls, do what needs doing. Our job as spiritual warriors is to live a life free of encumbrances, flowing like water downhill, being compassionate to one's self and others, at our passing leaving no trace.

With gassho,

Genjo Marinello

Additional Reading:

Daisetz T. Suzuki,
Zen and Japanese Culture,
Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery*,
Arnold Mindell, *The Shaman's Body*,
& *The Leader as Martial Artist*.

