

Martial Arts as a Philosophy? (and other reflections)

By Ian Deavin

© Ian Deavin July 2019, All Rights Reserved.
Article may be downloaded for personal use only

How do you explain the experience and feelings of becoming a mother/father grandparent for the first time?

When words are inadequate – use metaphor, modelling, corrections, introspection, partner work, investigation, discussion and demonstration, observation, mindfulness. Ah! Moments of realisation.

If martial arts has collected useful things from everywhere else – then we study everywhere that we may find them in order to understand them better and to find more useful things.

Martial arts as a philosophy? Approach to life? Lens on life? What do martial arts promote/train? What is the path of martial arts? What do martial arts offer the secular person? Is there a martial arts way of thinking? Is there martial arts without the body? A synthesis of ways of being that are both practical and offer hope for the future of humanity - martial arts as personal development and as a basis for social development. A Swiss Army knife for life?

At heart like any martial art Tai Chi is concerned with survival and surviving better – it is a core source - it is different for everyone who each find different things there and each take away different experiences and lessons.

It is a hub, a central access point for any and all sorts of thinking and activities.

It is not an intellectually defined system but an organic one that cannot be defined or taught intellectually - hence the concept of transmission. Part physical, part emotional and part intellectual.

Part directed, part osmotic. The transmission and the understanding depends on the participants and their relationships as much as the context and environment, as well as their intent. People will find what they are looking for. Success is guaranteed if you only keep looking.

What does the synthesis offer beyond the sum of its parts?

Does “Relax and Move” equate to “Relax and Live”?

The first step on a pathway of personal and social change allowing the individual to seek their potential as a human being in relation to other human beings, in a social context and in our wider universal environment. A path of learning and maturity – from fighting to healing to wisdom. Fighter – healer – sage.

Difficult to discuss in a meaningful way since by definition we can only do so intellectually, whereas the subject of human development is predominantly physical and emotional – therefore the intellect alone is inadequate to the task, however well-educated and trained. We cannot describe a feeling except by comparison with other shared experiences e.g. pain – how does it feel, where do you feel it, what is the effect on the rest of the body/mind/behaviour.

Indeed, the more we rely on our intellect then the more unbalanced we become – like someone who develops only one muscle or has only one tool to do everything – to one with a hammer, every problem looks like a nail. The modern western world has come to rely more and more on intellectual models, which work well much of the time e.g. in areas of theoretical science and technology, and are great for creation of fantasy from works of art, stories, computer games or religion but seem sadly lacking in the wisdom to tell the difference between fantasy and reality and

to apply the results. It is also of limited value in the emotional arena and in physical experience, except to de-skill it thereby making it more accessible.

We constantly come up against the problem that the majority of individual experience and communication is non-linguistic, we relate to each other personally with visual cues, tonality, touch and facial expression. The difficulty of using cumbersome language to communicate leads to ever more intellectualisation on the one hand and reversion to gross emotional triggers on the other – a polarisation that is difficult to deal with unless one is able to step outside and see what is really going on. In the same way as when two people are in an argument they do not see how that builds into a physical confrontation, but an uninvolved bystander can easily see and is left wondering how far it will go – or should they become involved. On the other hand, the experience of the confrontation is deeply personal – like dancing or making love where the senses such as touch are not shared with the onlooker.

Context and perspective are everything – martial arts offer the opportunity to understand the wider context and the perspective of others.

It is therefore important that we have personal experience of a physical, emotional and intellectual practice in a group setting such as we find in martial arts. Martial arts take the problem of physical survival and research ways of developing how improve those techniques so as to survive better – for example by using mental philosophical models gained from observation such as Taoism and Buddhism to perform physically better or further into old age – but always related directly to the real world – absorbing whatever is useful. Like a magician one needs to understand what is really going on in order to not be fooled.

Surviving better both personally and in our social groups – now encompassing the whole world.

How does the study of martial arts change us? Is there a relationship to religion?

How does it qualify as spiritual and brutal?

Philosophical basis is simple survival, then to survive better Zen Buddhism and Taoism which are both tools to improve technique and to develop the self. But what emerges from the practice, what is common to all martial arts not just Chinese ones?

A vacuum approach that seeks out anything which helps to optimise the use of mind and body – I have not found anything else that does this so comprehensively. What is it about using the mind, body and emotions together that is transformative?

One can practice martial arts exercises without being a martial artist but the link remains vital. Is it just about congruence? Is there wisdom on this road? Can you be an intellectual martial artist - is there an intellectual model that makes sense without the body and the emotions - no you are just left with a pile of bits like a dis-assembled car - you have all the working parts but no car. So lots of philosophy but no person - nobody. Humans are embodied beings we are hard wired with sensors and effectors - environment, context, connection, relationship physicality is the water we swim in - martial arts teach us how to swim whatever life brings. Martial arts present the opportunity to learn the skills of using our mind and body together.

An interesting comparison is with psychotherapy where we can consider CBT as overtly manipulative using carrots and sticks in an imposed training schedule to fit a template. It teaches us intellectually how to work with ourselves as we are but does little to deal with the cause of the problem. It is liked however by administrators because it offers data for analysis and overtly quick results.

NLP helps us to deal with ourselves emotionally in an intellectual way and so sits somewhere in the middle

Let us compare with more body-oriented psychotherapy which I think of as a way of enabling the person to develop and grow the way they think, feel, interpret and experience the world to develop genuine understanding and to thus find their way of relating to others as equals. However, it does not provide easily managed data, takes a long time to achieve recognisable results and so is not liked by administrators who do not do not understand it anyway.

Normal psychotherapy seeks to allow the person to see themselves and the reality of the world so as to choose their path of personal development. Other programs seek to impose an approved template - which may be a good one but is still one size fits all so is not a complete system. A bit like the comparison between Karate and Tai Chi - Karate offers a template - Tai Chi is a complete system. Both are good but one takes over where the other stops.

Are all paths alike - what is different with martial arts and why?

Things like personal respect, personal responsibility, acceptance of reality, ability to visualise the possible, communication. Patience, calmness, empathy, tolerance, perceptiveness, flexibility, perseverance, sense of humour, how to use and deal with pain, loss and death, self-awareness, self-worth, achieve potential, balance, deal with change, understanding social rules and their relevance, coming to a view of the social contract worldwide. Health - perpetuates function, education for life, a non-political but deeply political outcome. How to be an individual in a group-oriented society.

What does a balanced human being look like?

Is balance holding the extremes together in one body so having the ability to be extreme without the need to go there?

All this and more.

You can only teach what you know - although you can learn from observing others what they do not know, but remember as the physicist Richard Feynman said. "the first principle is that you must not fool yourself – and you are the easiest person to fool." Fortunately, it seems that our bodies do not lie which is a major benefit of bodywork in personal development.

The best revenge is a happy life – old Jewish saying.

How do martial arts relate to other aspects of human existence - some examples - physical, intellectual, emotional, being a - parent, teacher, business person, gardener, sports-person. Working as a team while staying an individual.

A Tai Chi style approach - all encompassing - absorbing what is useful and understanding the difference. Developing life skills.

Mind, body, spirit - when people talk about working in terms of mind, body and spirit they often actually only work with mind and spirit but ignore the body. It is essential to consider the embodiedness of mind and spirit and to learn how to work with the body. To engage all three with each other - otherwise they are like someone sitting on a 3-legged stool with one leg very much shorter than the other two. Learning to do this is not a matter of forcing the body to conform to intellectual rules but to understand its role in the subconscious and the conscious self. In a very real sense the body is the (sub conscious) self – once we learn to trust our subconscious then we can become our "self".

The difference between a fighter and a martial artist -

The oldest profession? The longest lived path of understanding ourselves and the world around us.

Developing a skilful way of thinking – by training consciously we learn to trust our subconscious selves and work intuitively – this simplifies life – we put experience, education and training together enabling us to access subconscious processes, which enable us to give us quick and correct

answers without consciously working it out. "You know when it is right". We now understand that the conscious is only the surface – the subconscious is the whole person and is much more powerful than the conscious alone. A bit like a desktop computer connected to a supercomputer – the desktop can run simple models without interfering with the operation of the main organism. Working together they are extremely powerful – but there is a skill in creating this relationship – Tai Chi is a perfect forum to develop that skill.

Dealing with distractions and delusions, understanding reality and true intentions.

Developing empathy, developing proprioception, developing listening skills, also mindfulness, loosening the body, gravity resistance work for the body, relaxed movement, pliability and elasticity, focus and devolved focus, awareness of different perspectives, working co-operatively, trusting others, observational skills, learning to see/feel what one is really doing and understanding why, learning to see/feel it in others, calming mind and body - acting in the moment, responding not reacting, learning to use pain as a learning tool, understanding the different kinds of pain - what they mean and how to deal with them, creating and directing change, becoming your own teacher/guru, seeking whatever is useful, having a close connection with reality - being grounded but also thoughtful, dealing with potential and actual fighting using empty hands and weapons even in staged situations brings one to consider injury and death as physical and emotional realities, shared experience of martial arts creates a community and mutual understanding, thinking about martial arts keeps the brain active in a comprehensive way, physical practice keeps the body healthy, practicing observing one's feelings helps one to be authentic and congruent, long term practice allows one to be aware of long term mental and physical health trends in one's life and to manage problems as they occur so as to maintain optimal functioning for as long as possible e.g. fine motor skills and clinical issues.

We seek to understand reality and separate it from fantasy and so come to an understanding of one's place in the world, viewing the social contract, understanding the use of power on personal and social levels, looking at the flow of events, understanding history and future possibilities. Understanding relationships and the difference between a creative and a destructive relationship, learning to trust oneself and others, we study inter-personal and group dynamics.

Learning how to make mistakes and how to learn from them. Dealing with guilt and blame – how to apologise sincerely and move on.

This is a natural consequence of the path, a path paralleled by others but few of which include the physical.

Success is assured you just have to keep going - change and development are the natural consequence of being human and moving positively.

Enlightenment and wisdom - the difference between an intellectual spiritual approach and living a holistic life. Vince Morris "It's easy to achieve enlightenment at the top of a mountain but come down here and try it." Down to earth, practical - martial arts. Loose that connection and you lose humanity.

Real change can only ever come from the grass roots of ourselves or of society. The sky intellect or elites cannot consider any change that does not fit their existing paradigm or support their extreme position, based on disconnected artificial models and assumptions. A reality-based approach (based on martial arts understanding) frees us from this.

Individuals move from the centre as do societies - effective change can only come from the deep core based on grounded connections, aided by intellectual sky thinking but only ever connected to the centre.

It is everything and nothing.

It seems that interchange of ideas has always been extensive – perhaps more than we realise – with travellers on the silk road and martial artists travelling to meet others to learn from their great skill, academics and monks travelling and writing to each other - but really quite limited to elites or elite skill groups – people with lots of money or dedication. Globalisation through cheap travel and internet communication, coupled with longer life spans gives ordinary people access to these ideas and the process of self-education.

Now we can all see that the emperor has no clothes if we just have the skill to avoid the distractions and delusions all around us.

Personally, I am always coming up against the how/what problem – exemplified by e-mail where we can say “what” but the tone, expression, etc. is missing so a lot of interactive humour does not work online. If 30% of communication is verbal “what” and the other 70% is non-verbal “how” it is not surprising that text based communication is difficult since we are missing the “physical communication” of visual cues, tonal expression and touch. How often in life do we have the sense that the other person/people do not “get” us because they do not make the same connections we do from a shared background experience – something which I find martial arts is very good at – so long as it is not “sportified”. Sharing of a common experience is essential to sharing of understanding and martial arts give us the opportunity to share the experience of working together with others in dealing with such a basic need as survival – an opportunity to walk in the shoes of others in a significant physical and emotional way.

Perhaps this is one reason why mature people are attracted to Tai Chi – having a good memory of life lived lends perspective and recognition of life’s lessons which give depth to the practice as well as the ability to see shared experiences among people who, though they have never met still share a background of similar experiences.

I am still surprised at the way many students resist the idea of doing partner work – since it involves touching another person – they are also often scared of working with mirrors – from fear of seeing themselves. Intellectually they can talk about it but few can deal with it emotionally, our society has become so separated from the earthy reality of our evolutionary past.

So, given that communication is 70/30 non-verbal/verbal we can consider that the message is also 70/30 how/what.

Ultimately the how is often much more important than the what - if you don't do it properly then sometimes you can't do it at all. In the case of Tai Chi this involves sequential segmental movement - the sequence is critical as with most things in life. Timing is vital - as is starting in the right place.

We seek a way to deal with chaos by resiliently moving within the chaos. Thinking cannot do this - it is inadequate to the task but it can help - which is its role.

Fighting is probably the closest physical thing to the complexity and subtlety of group social interaction. We train so that our subconscious is able to work freely in the moment without restraint so that we can keep our heads when all about us are losing theirs.

We cannot control others so we seek skill in dealing with whatever comes from wherever. We train in ways that will help us to develop balance, resilience, strength in all arenas – a major component is to learn what is real and to avoid delusions.

We learn for example to see what is really going on when we are personally bombarded with demands or world leaders attempt to obfuscate and create chaos to unbalance their opponents – by seeing the reality we are better able to maintain our own balance – to keep our own course on a stormy sea.

Learning how to co-operate – learning together, supporting each other, trusting others, team working,

Martial arts as a relationship at one end of the spectrum – at the other a loving relationship. One gets to choose one's intent and manage the relationship in a destructive way like in a fight or in a supportive and creative way. Even in a fight one may not want to destroy one's opponent – only to stop them injuring oneself. It is about survival not destruction although that may be involved. It is about balance and how to manage that.

Equality and earned respect – we are all beginners and there is always someone better than you.

Hawks and doves, doves that think they are hawks, hawks that want to rehabilitate and lead the flock by becoming philanthropists, doves that lead doves but seek to appease the hawks. Doves that learn how to deal with hawks - martial artists.

Taoism, external/internal arts - chimps and bonobos split by the Congo river - chimps aggressive and territorial - bonobos sexual, touchy feely.

We are really talking about developing and defining what we mean by "humanity".

Each of us in our own way can progress our own personal development which adds to that of others resulting in the development of society on a global basis. The more enlightened people there are the more likely is a long-term positive outcome for humanity. Enlightened self-interest upgrades from the individual to the community and upward over time to the species.

What the world needs is a gardening community that can work to lead it in a positive direction - think Azimov Foundation and Empire. That can lay the groundwork for the growth of humanity.

Actually, we already have one - all the many organisations, groups and communities seeking alternative solutions.

Think of the corporations and power structures as an aggressive invasive species that is taking over the garden - it is beneficial but not as a dominating monoculture that will destroy the natural balance.

How can we encourage this natural growth of society? How can we offer society what it needs to enable it to grow with humanity.

How can we provide what each plant needs to grow and develop its potential - supporting the doves and enabling the hawks to contribute without destroying the balance of the garden? As a community we need to learn how to set limits on and harness the activities of the hawks/weeds to the benefit of all. Martial arts is a good starting point for this - as is gardening. It is a project with a very long lifespan beyond the scope of any individual.

Martial artists and gardeners are both used to slow progress over a long time span - both can nurture gently and prune ruthlessly. Both are used to working with their changing environment over which they have little control. Both plant seeds and watch them grow.

Change can only grow from the ground up. Unfortunately, we have only intellectual tools to communicate with, tools that self-select people who are attracted by the intellectuality of the medium and the message but only a few of whom are comfortable with learning by physical/emotional methodologies. This intellectuality also excludes the non-intellectuals.

Unfortunately, I can see where this is headed – towards a revealed truth and a religion and a uniform society - dangerously recreating the past. That is a cycle that needs to be broken. So, what is the point? To help individuals to explore their potential humanity and so to enable human society to do the same. Plant the seeds and trust people to find a new way of being and of being together – one that is truly human, bringing together all the best of the past into a new synthesis – much as the way original Tai Chi Chuan came together from the many ideas of that period, creating something that is greater than the sum of its parts.

There is perhaps a sort of nexus forming that will bring forth a new synthesis for humanity. Never before has there been such an opportunity for every individual on the planet to share in ideas and information and to feed this back into society. Maybe we can learn to implement the concept of enlightened self-interest on personal and social levels. In this time of global awareness there is the possibility of more understanding of the past and of individual and social possibilities than ever before – it is time we grew up as individuals and as a species.

In the end we have to trust our own humanity as individuals, as a society and as a species. How we get where we are going is becoming clearer on an intuitive level if one observes the sweep of history then the likely forward path emerges. In the main my version is positive even though I have no idea what it looks like - but then that is half the interest.

So, the question really is how can embodied, thinking, feeling beings release themselves from the chains of fear and delusion while recognising the reality of our existence?

Does a martial arts approach have an answer?

The world has an unprecedented opportunity with global communication at all levels of society - the tools are available and accessible to take global societies to the next stage.

Tai Chi may be the perfect vehicle for change - it has all the components, it has science, mystery and magic, once on the path people learn to think for themselves.

This is a period of turmoil - people need the tools to navigate the chaos - a synthesis of Tai Chi could provide this. Tai Chi is essentially the skill of balancing forces internally and externally – we need different techniques in different areas – but the principles are always the same. If we look at what is helpful in surviving a conflict or in life then we find ourselves looking for observation, resilience, strength, flexibility, relaxation, softness, sensitivity, power etc. We have tai chi chuan for martial training and tai chi for health. Perhaps also tai chi for the mind, tai chi for the spirit, and tai chi for life. Of course, that is really just Tai Chi broken down – but perhaps more accessible that way?

If you nurture saplings well, they will grow straight towards the light.

The thought that “there is no such thing as Tai Chi” – ranks alongside the Zen injunction “if you meet Buddha on the road, kill him”.

"The life of Dad" by Dr Anna Machin explains how the involved dad developed over the past 500,000 years to support the mother and ensure survival and education of the children.

Clearly this is a potentially inexhaustible task - one which mothers have come to rely on and rightly so, but have not in the main understood or appreciated. Hence the huge number of fathers who wear themselves out seeking to meet the demands of the mother and children - literally working themselves to death for their families. Since this task is so general, so varied, and looks so much like normal life, it has not been identified in the same way as motherhood which is much more obvious.

Fathers become the flexible support that allows mothers to be mothers and kids to be kids - and yet feminism and the mainstream press depict fathers as feckless, power crazed boys with toys. While mothers are sympathised with and told they "are worth it" - they deserve as much "me time" as they feel they want/need and can pretty much behave as they want providing fathers with lists of ever-increasing demands – is it any wonder that divorce rates are up? This is clearly a balance long in need of attention on both sides.

As support staff to the main act of mother and child with different and diverse roles it is difficult for men to be themselves recognised and supported – I have long supported the feminist movement – and only wished that men had one too - they need a different kind of support to mothers - for example the men in sheds movement.

Motherhood in modern society is not satisfied with survival of the child but now demands that he/she is equipped for success in the myriad ways possible - fathers frequently take this on as a challenge which then becomes a question of how well the father is able to meet the mother's expectations for "her" child. Fathers are sometimes so little regarded that they are rarely considered as equal to the mother.

Does this also explain the way women are regarded as being good at multi-tasking and group co-operation which they have to do to support their child? Whereas it has traditionally been men who have created the businesses and projects necessary to create and support the wider society. Interestingly a role which also requires the ability to multi task, network and cooperate - just in a different way to that practiced by women and so not recognised or valued by them. On these matters we live in a time when it is the views of women which are considered authoritative. Given this hard wired and unlimited male support role it appears often to transmute into ambition and over achievement, sometimes in pathological ways - for the majority however it simply leads to burn out and perhaps retirement - probably with more "to do " lists.

Compare with the Hindu model of men and women who, once their family has grown up, go out into the world to live as penniless sanyasin monks for a year or more - to re-evaluate their lives.

Essential Steps humanity must find how to take for our own long-time survival

Grow up as a species

Recognise our community interdependency

Learn to operate as a global society – e.g. with globally aligned enforceable rules on the larger issues – legal, trade, taxes, war crimes etc

Plan for global survival and sustainability

We all need to stop thinking that we can all be rich

Start thinking about everybody living like human beings with a reasonable lifestyle

We need to reign in the very rich and the very powerful

Seek a more equitable sharing of wealth and land - re define the rentier economy.

Sovereign countries to take back their responsibility for their citizens.

Stop taking stuff out of the ground - learn to respect the commons.

Re define the concept of ownership

Focus on recycling

Stop encouraging large families, replacement is enough

Encourage technologies that use less - less materials and less energy

Promote recyclables and renewables.

Focus big projects like space into single global organisations.

Get religion and racial tribalism out of the mainstream of society – encourage community with recognition of outsiders as well as insiders.

Clear up the mess we have made

Stop destroying the environment that supports us.

It seems that there is a natural path of human development built into our genes – a path that “guides” us to find our potential – the path of martial arts is one such path. These paths are our personal ways to growing up, perhaps even to wisdom. It seems logical to consider that there is a similar process for humanity itself – also built into our genes – and like the personal path, also requiring work to bring to balance and wisdom – and survival. Fortunately there is some evidence that this is taking place – only time will tell if it is enough.

Version: July 2019

Ian Deavin

www.sheffordtaichi.org