

(Half) A lifetime in Martial Arts – some personal experiences of the wider territory covered over 38 years

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My own Martial Arts history in brief

As a young person I found I was seeking “something” not then available from my environment – an understanding of life, of people etc. With science and sports based interests I was completely unsatisfied with the mainstream western/middle-eastern religions and cultures – the far-east promised something different and Karate with its Japanese philosophical connections and a promise of physical defensive power from using the body in a different way, had a lot of attraction.

So I started in Karate while at university, where I trained for 3 years. At the time Karate was one of the few styles available and was very popular, with the UK teams being successful internationally, although over the years I realised that the sport side was not where my competence or my interest lay. My own training continued only for a couple of years after University and lapsed for several years thereafter. However like many people who have trained in martial arts for even a short period the experience stayed with me and I returned to training in my early 30s.

Along the road I achieved temporary grades a couple of times (to be automatically confirmed 6 months later) – and each time had much soul searching as these grades were often considered not quite valid – clearly the highly ranked and respected teachers that awarded them were happy about them, but many other senior grades were not. This conflict started a useful thought process and led me to notice the spiral nature of my progress. This seemed to involve me going round the same kind of development process every few years, each time challenging, learning and changing only to consolidate then go round the whole thing again in the next few years – it seems to take me about 7 to 10 years to complete a cycle.

This process was heightened by my starting Tai Chi practice in the same year I gained my first black belt grade in Karate and continued until I found other teachers who combined soft technique with hard style – finding a balance that I had not till then been aware of as a possibility. Further on I was introduced to “vital point” strategy in older style Karate and in modern Tai Chi. The sheer speed, power and brutality of this approach was frightening – it gave me much thought about the human condition – especially since the people teaching it were balanced thoughtful human beings. I found in the end that it is those very factors that give martial arts their value and meaning, and encourage us to balance ourselves with a search for the positive side of ourselves. Almost as if unconsciously we seek to fill our potential – the trick being to do this constructively not destructively.

Personal defence

Pretty obvious and the first thing that comes to mind – but interestingly probably not the most important, since I have never actually had need to defend myself from real physical attack – possibly because as a student of physical conflict I try simply to not be there when it happens! As one of my teachers – Vince Morris - put it “I hate violence – I just want to get it over with as quickly as possible and go home for tea”

Nonetheless for me it has proven a vital starting point and today still provides a structure and rationale for the learning process of life. Based simply on the question “does it work?” good martial arts provide a very realistic approach in a world that is littered with unreality and fantasy

where people would often prefer to believe in magic or perpetuate a blame culture, than try to understand what is going on and deal with it.

Physical exercise

What can I say – martial arts and their sport related activities are excellent for anyone who wants to use their body, as well as working comfortably with other people's bodies. Arts like Karate, Kung Fu or Judo/Jujitsu are tremendous energetic cardiovascular exercise with a program of learning about how to control, train and use one's body. Whereas the "soft arts" like Tai Chi take that all a step further – the dynamism and hard training are there if you want it but they also introduce a completely different view of the way that the human body works and how it can be changed to work better well into very old age.

Fun

It can be great fun working with others in a physical way, emotionally close and a good way to release tensions. There are lots of tricks and games accessible within the partner work where one can learn the difference between good natured fun and the other kind. It is a way to learn who is safe to play with and how to be a responsible play partner. For anyone with "the kid" still in them it is just fun!

I have friend who is an amateur stand-up comedian and magician – it is remarkable the similarities between these two and the principles of martial arts – he is by profession a senior health and safety officer – an occupation that in principle at least also seems to share a lot with martial arts.

Philosophy

All around martial arts are links to other ways of seeking understanding from Taoism, Buddhism and Zen to the magic spells used by Samurai before battle and the organised religions of the world as well as the use of western science. As I discuss under "the vacuum cleaner of martial arts" the Occam's razor principle comes to bear and those elements that are useful and work to our benefit are studied, weighed, understood and absorbed. These may include the Taoist principle of duality, the Buddhist awareness that in harming others we harm ourselves, the Hindu principle of action, the use of emotional tools to deal with stressed situations or knowledge of physics or biology to understand destructive and healing techniques.

The fast developing science of modern neurophysiology in particular offers possible explanations of why martial arts practices, proven over generations, actually work, while suggesting improvements and ways to help understand the things that are truly useful and those that are not. Even an understanding of evolution, chaos theory and quantum mechanics give us insights to the underlying patterns of reality and show remarkable similarities to principles expressed in ancient world views that contribute to the martial arts environment.

Martial arts therefore becomes a unifying lens for making mental connections in order to understand the world – science, psychology, politics, art, religion an all-encompassing approach which greatly informs our understanding of mainstream organised religions, social contracts, power blocs and establishment or revolutionary structures – it leads to a reality based and human centred approach to politics.

Meditation and hypnotism

Both much misunderstood but closely linked to martial arts. Meditation in particular being a simple if difficult practice, that in my experience can greatly aid life in general by allowing the conscious mind to calm and to release the unconscious mind to work, so greatly enhancing our abilities both mental and physical. It seems that the unconscious is much more capable than the conscious so that if we attempt to do everything consciously then we are simply too slow. Also in life I find that by meditating, the confusion of conscious thought is replaced by an intuitive understanding that "rings true" and which later subjected to conscious reasoning proves to be logically true as well. Hypnotism also, by working with the unconscious gives us pointers to

those things that hold us back and those that can mislead our opponent.

Understanding the link between mind, body and emotions

Martial arts seems to start with physical work/training – however even before then we are drawn to it emotionally or we would not begin and from the first lesson we use our minds to learn the choreographic patterns associated with learning about fighting techniques. Whether implicitly or explicitly, training in martial arts constantly calls on all aspects of our personalities and benefits from some very old techniques. Techniques like modelling the instructor, visualising a move or an opponent, understanding uses of visual and tactile inputs, mapping our personal space, learning about our fear and how we let it affect us, learning how to focus and how to clear our minds, feeling the sensations within our bodies and how to use them and alter them to change our body usage. We learn how our emotions affect the way we use our bodies and how our mind can get in the way of our actions, perhaps by imposing rules on ourselves or by imposing rules placed on us by others. We also learn how working with our bodies affects our minds/emotions; it seems that encouraging our body to become more balanced, poised, resilient etc. has a similar effect on our mental/emotional responses, enabling us to behave more calmly and rationally. This becomes a constant cycle of change – gradually teasing out our inner self to fulfil our potential as an individual; ultimately it can be a route to self-awareness – emotional, intellectual, and physical.

Social friendships – sharing with like-minded people all around the world

There are lots of martial arts all around the world – I have been fortunate enough to travel somewhat and have been able to use my interest as a way of meeting people at a more intimate level than as a simple tourist. This sharing with like-minded people has not only provided many lessons in martial arts but also on life in general. By travelling in search of teachers and training partners one automatically becomes involved with the local culture at a normal every day level rather than as a spectator. Experienced martial artists seem to have a certain common shared experience which enables them to relate to each other quite easily and on a deep emotional level – one may notice a sort of “martial arts humour” – something which can turn a class into quite a light hearted and fun group. This makes for a very friendly and rewarding experience and the opportunity to make many friends around the world.

A constant interest and regular daily work – kung fu

Most of us have “an interest” – from a favourite TV program to an all-consuming passion for collecting. Human beings seem to have a need for one or more interests that we return to regularly. In large part these interests feed our inquisitive natures and our need for self-expression or just our desire to make sense of the world even in a limited way. Martial arts offers all that and more, it is a subject as big as you want to make it and as consuming as you wish, with the benefit that each piece of kung fu (literally daily work) practice or thought adds to your knowledge and ability, with improvement possible well into very old age – I have known practitioners who didn't start until their 60s and others in their 80s and 90s who were still extremely capable. Covering as it does the mental and physical, martial arts offers a way to remain personally capable to the end of one's years – for example even a small amount of Tai Chi practice has been shown to improve balance in old people – reducing falls and associated injuries by significant amounts.

A way to change and adapt to change

I have found the path offered by martial arts to be one of change – as we walk that path we necessarily change ourselves – although we do not know what that change will be and often only become aware of it in hindsight, we learn to trust ourselves and to allow that process to occur. Consequently we can also learn how to change the situations that life offers us, perhaps from negative to positive and even from conflicts of power to caring constructive ones.

Learning from other's experience

Overtly we learn from our teachers (experts) and in martial arts it is important that these are people who can not only teach, but must be able to do what they teach. They actually cannot

teach if they do not understand from personal experience and ability – even a poor teacher must be able to “walk the walk” however poorly, or they simply cannot make their techniques work at all. The best of teachers I have found are the ones who are excellent exponents but also have a teacher or teachers themselves i.e. they are people who have found their own “teacher within” and have taken responsibility for their own learning and change – going wherever they must to facilitate that process.

This also encourages us to learn from non-teachers - such as older people and the stories of strangers – we learn to benefit from their going before us and sharing their experience. Everyone has a story and often there is nugget of gold within, that challenges us and extends our world model.

Giving back

Paradoxes abound in martial arts - so much of this effort to behave intuitively is actually counter-intuitive! Take teaching for example – as students we tend to view the teacher as a source of information to be included in our world view – they have the information – we want it, they take our money and in return they pass it on to us. Wrong!

As an experienced student I have found that actually the best teachers are the ones who set up exercises or situations which challenge me and provide me with an opportunity to learn and change both my perspective and my world view as well as changing my body. So it becomes less about information transfer and more about the student exploring the possibilities. It becomes my responsibility to accept that process wherever I find it. Within a teacher/student relationship we have the benefit of “one who has gone before” to help us in that with “signposts” both physical and otherwise. Quite often we may not recognise they are signposts or just choose to miss-interpret or ignore them – teachers can find this quite trying - perhaps that is how they learn patience!

As a teacher I have found that I learn at least as much as my students – not only do I use the opportunity of demonstrating to add to my practice (from which I learn) but also the process of explaining and demonstrating often finds me dealing with a question and doing things I didn't know I could, in order to show how they work!

When we give back – we learn even more – we learn quicker and we learn things we probably wouldn't learn on our own.

Social change

One of the earliest organised areas of human endeavour – that of co-operative personal defence is also one of the oldest nurturing grounds of individualism and personal growth. Martial arts is one field of endeavour that feeds an alternative perspective into society by enabling individual effort and thought to develop. It is my observation that the personal development of an individual is mirrored in a much longer time span by development of our societies, which are also born, develop and grow, mature, grow old and wither away. They too are constantly changing. An understanding of a martial arts perspective helps in understanding social change and would benefit those involved in it.

Personal responsibility

Your teacher says:

- “stand in-front of this person. He is going to hit you. Only you can stop him.” – one learns to become responsible for oneself.

- “Now hit this person standing in-front of you. You should do so hard enough to hurt him but not hard enough to injure. It will be his turn next time.” You learn to be responsible for others. In the course of this perhaps you make a mistake and hurt someone - so you learn to accept responsibility and apologise. Incidentally you also learn that it can be very hard to hurt someone significantly when they are prepared for it and that you yourself can withstand a great deal without real damage. The fear is usually worse than the reality.

- “You should give this your very best efforts – if I do not believe you are doing so then I will partner with you” you learn about a group contract. In this case it is not about how good you are, it is not even about the rules, it is about giving your best efforts within the group and trusting the group environment – that is the contract. The teacher’s side of the deal is that they will care for the students and teach in the students best interests.
- “Work with me” you learn about care, control, previously unknown possibilities and about one’s own level of ability.
- “learn this pattern” you learn to take responsibility for your own learning.
- “learn this pattern of partner work – work gently together to understand your balance” you learn sensitivity about the interactions between self and others.
- “what might be the application for this posture/pattern/technique? “you learn to look for reality however brutal i.e. does it work. You become responsible for that. You recognise a choice - that you are responsible for the kind of person you are – and recognise that you always were.

In the end we learn to deal with chaos situations where there are no rules – we learn to create a little bit of personal order in that chaos and to recognise just how important rules really are – or not.

It’s OK to be a “Sunday warrior”

Every field of endeavour needs people with a range of abilities and commitments to develop and pass on knowledge to others – there is a place for the fighter, the practical, the theorist, the full timer and the part timer. Not everyone can be “the best” but everyone can be the best they can and that will generally mean making allowances for their lifestyle commitments – like family and work. Martial arts practice calls for 100% commitment when you are doing it - we seek to be entirely “present” – to be able to bring all of ourselves to the situation, mentally physically, emotionally - but then we also seek to be appropriately committed within an exercise. We can learn that being “over committed” is almost as problematic as being under committed since too much commitment at the wrong time can hand our balance to our training partner or opponent. We notice that commitment means different things to different people at different times, so we can learn to understand what that level is for others and how to achieve it personally, in conflict or in life – even that we can be 100% committed without apparently doing anything at all.

The individual as a team player

Martial arts offer a forum for the individual to develop, and to understand that one cannot do so on one’s own. We each need others to work with – they provide us with a learning experience and we do likewise. Each player shares similar goals and we collaborate toward achieving those goals. We learn to co-operate in sharing knowledge, observations, challenges. We welcome, we nurture and we provoke, we stand on our own and we are inclusive. We learn to work with others with our bodies and our minds and our emotions. We offer ourselves for others to use as learning tools and we use them in turn. We learn self-motivation and the benefits of sharing, we communicate subtle concepts with people keen to apply the question – does it work? We learn respect for others and to expect it from them.

A route to a personal survival strategy and how to survive better

A recurring question in my own experience of martial arts has been “why do I continue?” The answer has been different each time – and each time it has moved me in a different direction gradually toward the latest iteration when I realised that for me it is not just a way of learning to survive but also a way of learning to survive better. So in seeking to understand ourselves, others and life in general we can actually find what is important to us and what is not – we can use that understanding to create more of the important stuff and avoid the unimportant.

Learning about destructive relationships and about creative relationships

Martial arts are definitely about understanding power based destructive interactions and becoming proficient at dealing with them – but having said that the way we study them is hugely creative, with many positive caring aspects. We humans are sophisticated creatures – for example when we learn an action with one side of our body we also learn it (although less well)

with the other side. When we see someone perform an action we can automatically mirror it within ourselves. When we see one thing we look for its opposite. Within the negative we find there is positive and vice-versa. The well known twin fish image of the Tao symbolises exactly that and so we can come to understand the difference between power based destructive relationships and caring, loving creative ones. For example it is only when one chooses to be bullying and manipulative that one foregoes the caring loving option – martial arts provide an opportunity for us to see this more clearly and recognise when we consciously or unconsciously make such choices – and to see it in others.

It just keeps getting better

Some martial arts provide a way of getting better as we get older - a way to preserve our physical and mental abilities – even increase them. Tai Chi is one art that has a reputation for this aspect, since it operates on the basis of physically changing the body while developing subtle skill in soft movements. These body changes enable us to place less reliance on major muscle groups (which deteriorate in old age) and to build up the resilience of support tissues such as tendons, ligaments, fascia, joint capsules etc. Its development of wavelike segmental movement is efficient and low impact, this balanced natural way of moving places little stress on the body – this bodywork and its associated philosophical model aids long term mental/emotional balance.

Many other arts also have old practitioners who are enabled to live better longer lives thanks to their practice – a case perhaps of re-couping the efforts (the kung fu) we have put in through our lives.

A well-trodden path

There seems to be a natural path in martial arts practice and its associated personal development – this runs through fighting, defence, training, sport, external (hard) arts, internal (soft) arts, with personal development growing along the way. Although one can join this path at different points and even alter the sequence, probably several times along the way hitting a ceiling, questioning one's route then repeating the cycle. Martial arts provide a structure for this personal development which essentially constitutes probably the oldest path of personal development and self-actualisation – the “way of the warrior” is surely at least as old as the paths of healing, paganism and theistic religions – and is much wider in its compass since it leaves no stone unturned in its search for useful reality.

In short, as my teacher Karel Koskuba says “success is assured - just keep turning up” - although I would add – “keep looking for positive change and don't get into a cul-de-sac”.

Rising above the need to win

There is a Tai Chi principle “to invest in loss” which, among other things, suggests that if we only want to win all the time then we will not learn anything new because we will only ever stay in our comfort zone, so in order to learn and improve in our training we should put this driven need aside, face our fears and allow ourselves to loose. Thus we allow ourselves to go into unknown territory, we learn to trust our training partners and deal with the unknown. We find there is always someone better somewhere and that everyone is in-fact on the same path – indeed that the masters have the same sort of questions and even make similar mistakes - although their mistakes are usually so small that the rest of us cannot even see them! In our search for excellence this just encourages us to look more carefully. When we invest in loss we find humility, compassion, humanity and begin to find a greater awareness of our own level of ability.

Something I valued when I started learning Tai Chi was the loss of the coloured belt grading system used in Karate and many martial arts – this serves a valuable purpose in the early stages but then blurs into just Black belt although retaining the hierarchy of Dan grades through from 1 to 10. The Tai Chi approach is that one can only really tell ability by touching someone - thus forcing us to be realistic about our own ability and that of others – not to rely on someone

else's opinion about the person in front of us. We learn to treat each other without prejudice.

Bridging east and west – translating between the cultures

Given a subject as diffuse, complex and multi-modal as martial arts it is a huge challenge to transmit information across the cultures – but one that has been met by many, many individuals. In my own case this has involved not only travelling quite a bit around the UK but also visiting Japan, Beijing, Hong Kong, Malaysia and France. As well as training with people from countries like South Africa, Belgium, Germany, Philippines, Czechoslovakia etc.

This experience of meeting, training and socialising with interesting people of world class ability and differing backgrounds is a tremendously exciting cultural/ideological and culinary experience – a valuable lesson in appreciating people as individuals - on a global scale. These people in the main have been warm, kind, generous, balanced, rounded, and thoughtful, with a breadth of experience across the many spans of human endeavour.

Some very different ways of using one's body and mind

Exploration of self and others is central to martial arts and nowhere more so than in finding the huge variety of ways that the human body can be used to gain an advantage over an opponent. Interestingly this wide ranging search tends to come to conclusions that have much in common with other creative arenas such as dance, skiing, boarding, swimming etc. etc. – the differences being that they are either co-operative e.g. dance, team sports or solitary e.g. boarding – whereas martial arts by definition involves at least one other person and differs in that we are learning to neutralise the power of others and to transmit our own power in order to control them. This can lead to training groups which are very creative and co-operative study partnerships.

It becomes important to find fluidity in movement and resilience in our bodies – while doing so we may come to notice that all movements become the same and we practice our art all the time consciously or not. In order to do this we seek to pattern advantageous types of usage into our unconscious body/mind, so that when needed the appropriate movements will come automatically – we find that conscious action is simply too slow to deal with the chaos of a self-defence/fight situation – we must be prepared ahead of time - this requires us to develop the potential mentally, physically and emotionally to deal with anything very fast indeed. Ultimately this leads us beyond fixed techniques to a strategy based on an understanding of the principles played out in the world.

Dealing with pain

Pain on many levels - physical, emotional, pain of hurt, pain of change, even positive change can hurt, pain becomes a tool for learning, from the shock of a cane strike in Buddhist meditation of a Koan to cut through consciousness to satori or enlightenment, to the pain of being hit in training which can also lead to enlightenment. In many ways we learn that pain is a very useful tool for learning. It can lock a lesson into subconscious body memory, it can drive us out of habituated thinking or behaviours and it can be used to give internal feedback on body usage or to manage a physical problem – or sometimes a mental/emotional one. So we learn not to fear pain and even to minimise it as we can under hypnosis and we learn to differentiate between pain that will heal and pain that represents long term damage. Further we learn the sensitivity to notice feelings of discomfort in our body and use these as a guide – seeking comfort in our body usage being a good guide to its best usage.

Dealing with fear

I have found 2 ways of approaching this – the hard way and the soft way – ultimately I suspect we need both. The hard way is that of intimidation and pressure within an otherwise safe environment such as Karate or similar which encourages us to build strong barriers. Whereas the soft way is more associated with arts such as Tai Chi which work at such a gentle level that we don't even realise that we are dealing with fear until we look back and recognise it was this that held us back all along and at which point we become able to deal with it more directly and

find a realistic balance.

As a healing process

I have found that the martial arts approach encourages us to be positive and creative in taking responsibility for our own health. For example Tai Chi training in principle is the same for health as for martial arts – one just needs to take it further and do a lot more of it for martial purposes. I have found management of physical dis-ease such as knee pain, headaches, inflammation, posture pain, low immune system, poor balance, lack of suppleness, high blood pressure etc. to be capable of self-management through appropriate training exercises. Indeed I have known people who claim to have dealt with previously crippling arthritis through their training. In addition martial arts give us an excellent entry point to addressing a range of emotional/psychological dis-eases either within a training group or one to one with an experienced teacher – and of course – being a martial artist – by seeking out help and knowledge from elsewhere in order to, as Bruce Lee said “absorb what is useful”. Consequently we can learn to incorporate both “alternative” and mainstream techniques as a holistic healing process.

Awareness of others & respect and caring for others

Have you ever been in a crowd where everyone is so “uptight” and uncomfortable with close personal space that there is a lot of joggling, hard nudging and people overbalancing? Or perhaps in another crowd where there is comfortable close contact and when you need to move others respond easily to your movements? This body awareness is at the heart of martial arts – like good dance partners or close team players one can tell what is going on by touch – we seek improved kinaesthetic senses and unconscious sensitivity. This awareness of others, their movements and their abilities enables a respect and added empathy. We literally become used to putting ourselves in another’s place, in order to read and accommodate their actions – this is especially true when teaching - where it is important to understand what is going on for a student by sight and by physical contact. This process together with its philosophical background connections of say Buddhism/Taoism can lead naturally to greater humility, understanding of, and caring for people in general.

For everything positive there is a negative

It’s not all sunny – my experiences in 38 years of martial arts practice have been predominately positive – especially in later years. It is my belief and experience that human beings in general prefer to gravitate towards creativity if they can, but as Taoist theory describes there is always an equal opposite and there are many people who move toward the “dark side” as individuals or as groups. It seems to me that it is our humanity that holds the balance – a fragile balance that can move from time to time even within the same individual, subject to our disposition and external stresses. I believe that like any endeavour, the end could go either way – it all depends on the person.

Accepting the duality of self

In martial arts we hold this balance very personally – unless we seek the ability to be brutally destructive when necessary then we will not achieve our goal of self-defence – and yet we seek love and creativity. Unless we seek to fulfil our humanity then we limit our martial ability by becoming side tracked and locked in a cul-de-sac of destruction – which is eventually self-destructive - so we limit our ability to change, and our ability to deal with the chaos of life. Ultimately in accepting the extremes of our humanity we get to be human by being able to hold the balance within ourselves. We perhaps learn the ability to go to extremes and survive there, but to live in an internally balanced harmony.

Learning to push the envelope

In facing the regular challenge of personal practice and partner work we soon learn that in order to progress we must learn and understand more than we do now – we must in other words constantly extend ourselves beyond our comfort zone – sometimes to the point where we wonder if our comfort zone still exists and even perhaps to a point where actually the process of

change becomes our comfort zone.

Learning to do risky things safely

Much of the enjoyment of life involves varying elements of risk – martial arts provide a safe environment for us to learn how to manage personal risk and how to learn to do risky things with relative safety. We learn that there is no such thing as perfect anything, least of all safety but that we can deal with this and enjoy it.

The difference and similarities between “fighters” and Martial Artists

I have often wondered about this one – perhaps the best I can offer is that in my observation fighters just enjoy fighting, they simply get on with it as an end in itself, perhaps somewhere along the way they get interested in studying what they do and become martial artists. When they do – especially if they are successful fighters and intelligent people then martial arts gains a lot of grounding reality and sometimes a whole new style. Perhaps what they do share is the fun of physical interaction, of training and using their bodies and the challenge of, in this case a destructive relationship. It seems that street fighters learn on the street and bullies exist in all walks of life, however I believe that most martial artists are looking for something which is more positively about survival, defence and the many aspects of life that are impacted by physical conflict. In the end this can become more about healing and building a better life and helping others to do the same.

The vacuum cleaner of martial arts

Martial arts seem to operate on 2 basic principles – “Absorb what is useful” and “Does it work?” – it turns out that there is a huge amount that is at least potentially useful, but actually very much less that works – at least works reliably. This leads us down many paths of science, philosophy, psychology, arts, dance and personal expression, etc., etc... this has led over the years to a sort of “vacuum cleaner” approach that seeks-out, absorbs and sifts knowledge, seeking an understanding of the basic principles that can be applied in life in general and physical conflict situations in particular. This implies that fighting is just the destructive extreme of life – love and caring coming at the other extreme and that the two extremes are inextricably linked, even intertwined, so in some way we hold the balance within ourselves and our societies, and by seeking to understand part we necessarily come to understand the whole.

Martial arts principles

There is no one list of these – they are for each of us to find since the statement of principle without understanding is only a first starting point. Hence the link between study and physical application. I have found good starting points to be books on Taoism and Tai Chi which lead to principles such as: flow, balance, opening/closing, weightedness, hard/soft, relaxation, power, potential, etc., etc. ... and of course their opposites.

Harmony

Some calm quiet state of untroubled existence? It may be and that is part of it – but as Vince Morris said “I’ve never come across harmony that didn’t take effort.” “Harmony in a monastery at the top of a mountain is fine – but come down here and do it with people demanding the bills be paid. Down here life comes at you like things on a conveyor belt, they just don’t stop and sometimes I think I have several other people’s conveyor belts coming at me.”

I have found that martial arts provide a way of finding that dynamic harmony as well as the quiet reflective kind.

Weapons

From my own limited experience I have found that working with weapons enables us to become more realistic about them mentally/emotionally and encourages greater fluidity physically. They also teach us to appreciate better the elements of range/reach and control of personal space – from close-in vulnerability issues of knives to reading the intentions of someone several metres away. Also the realities of knives and guns - not perhaps everyday experiences but nonetheless

a realistic understanding which may inform the fear driven daily narrative of the national tabloid press and even the debate on drugs.

The “master-disciple” or teacher-student relationship

Sometimes a loose teacher-student association, but often a varyingly close emotional bond, reaching the level of master-disciple. This relationship is in itself a learning experience – it is one in which complete trust and good will is usually regarded as the norm, where pain is accepted as necessary/useful and where self-awareness and self-discipline are considered essentials. Naturally these aspects are not always fully present – dealing with that is one function of the relationship. Once again martial arts has a knack of magnifying or pushing to an extreme in order to make a point until the student finally “gets it”. Paradoxically this is a relationship where often the teacher learns more than the student and where change is encouraged within a bounded safe context.

Some time ago I realised that in seeking teachers I was not only concerned about styles and techniques – equally important to me has been finding the right person - to learn from and with.

A moving target

We find there are no secrets in martial arts – only things we do not understand - things that are too small to see and things that are disguised – but they are all on open view for us to see and feel if we have the ability to interpret what we observe. Likewise as we come to understand more then we find that the answers – and the questions change. Things we thought we understood – we actually do not – and to further confuse, our teachers are changing as well and so teach differently.

It is as if each teacher presents a target to their students and as the student gets better at hitting the target, then the teacher makes it smaller, but because the teacher is also changing they become able to present smaller targets. At the same time different teachers are able to present different sized targets – the better they are the smaller the target.

A cautionary note

Dealing with things intuitively and getting them “right” is quite a goal in martial arts – after all the theory is that if you don’t then your opponent will hurt you and the best way to prevent that is to find the optimal/most efficient way to stop him/her. So actually many martial artists tend to be people who believe in lots of preparation (kung fu), so that when things kick off they can deal with problems automatically without leaving their comfort zone. They just want an easy life but are prepared to work hard to get it.

So reality and humility demand a cautionary note – working intuitively is often opaque to others and can be very confusing - excellent in a fight but not in day to day life – especially if one gets things wrong, in which case it is very difficult to explain - so be prepared to apologise!

So much for the first half – now to get serious