Martial Philosophy

Webster defines philosophy as the "theory or logical analysis of the principles underlying conduct, thought, knowledge, and the nature of the universe." Included in philosophy are ethics, aesthetics, logic, epistemology (the study of the origin, nature and limits of knowledge), metaphysics (study of the nature of being or reality), and so on. Put simply, philosophy is the general principles or laws of a field of knowledge.

The martial arts, more so than many other activities because it deals with life *and* death, is an endeavor rich in principles relating to human morals, character and behavior. Indeed, philosophy exerts a great deal of influence on the martial arts of both today and yesterday.

Excerpted from *Zen in the Art of Archery*, 1971, published by Vintage Books.

ZEN SWORDSMANSHIP

By Eugen Herrigel

Among swordmasters, on the basis of their own and their pupil's experience, it is taken as proved that the beginner, however strong and pugnacious he is, and however courageous and fearless he may be at the outset, loses not only his lack of self-consciousness, but his self-confidence, as soon as he starts taking lessons. He gets to know all the technical possibilities by which his life may be endangered in combat, and although he soon becomes capable of straining his attention to the utmost, of keeping a sharp watch on his opponent, of parrying his thrusts correctly and making effective lunges, he is really worse off than before, when, half in jest and half in earnest, he struck about him at random under the inspiration of the moment and as the joy of battle suggested. He is now forced to admit that he is at the mercy of everyone who is stronger, more nimble and more practiced than he. He sees no other way open to him except ceaseless practice, and his instructor too has no other advice to give him for the present. So the beginner stakes everything on surpassing the others and even himself. He acquires a brilliant technique, which gives him back some of his lost self-confidence, and thinks he is drawing nearer and nearer to the desired goal. The instructor, however, thinks differently—and rightly so, avers Takuan, since all the skill of the beginner only leads to his "heart being snatched away by the sword."

Yet the initial instruction cannot be imparted in any other way; it is thoroughly suited to the beginner. All the same it does not lead to the goal, as the instructor knows only too well.

Professor Eugen Herrigel, a German scholar who taught philosophy at the University of Tokyo between the world wars, is one of the Westerners who penetrated deeply and personally into the theory and practice of Zen Buddhism. He died in 1955.

That the pupil does not become a swordmaster, despite his zeal and even despite his inborn skill, is understandable enough. But why is it that he, who has long since learned not to let himself be swept away by the heat of battle, but to keep a cool head, to conserve his strength, and who now feels inured to long-drawn combats and can hardly find an opponent to match him in all his circle—why is it that, judged by the highest standards, he fails at the last moment and makes no headway?

The reason, according to Takuan, is that the pupil cannot stop watching his opponent and his swordplay; that he is always thinking how he can best come at him, waiting for the moment when he is off his guard. In short, he relies all the time on his art and knowledge. By so doing, Takuan says, he loses his "presence of heart": the decisive thrust always comes too late and he is unable to "turn his opponent's sword against him." The more he tries to make the brilliance of his swordplay dependent on his own skill, on his fighting experience and tactics, the more he initiates the free "working of the heart." What is to be done? How does skill become "spiritual," and how does sovereign control of technique turn into master swordplay? Only, so we are informed, by the pupil's becoming purposeless and egoless. He must be taught to be detached not only from his opponent but from himself. He must pass through the stage he is still at and leave it behind him for good, even at the risk of irretrievable failure. Does not this sound as nonsensical as the demand that the archer should hit without taking aim, that he should completely lose sight of the goal and his intention to hit it? It is worth remembering, however, that the master swordsmanship whose essence Takuan describes has vindicated itself in a thousand contests.

The instructor's business is not to show the way itself, but to enable the pupil to get the feel of this way to the goal by adapting it to his individual peculiarities. He will therefore begin by training him to avoid thrusts instinctively, even when they take him completely by surprise.

The pupil must develop a new sense or, more accurately, a new alertness of all his senses, which will enable him to avoid dangerous thrusts as though he could feel them coming. Once he has mastered this art of evasion, he no longer needs to watch with undivided attention the movements of his opponent, or even of several opponents at once. Rather, he sees and feels what is going to happen, and at that same moment he has already avoided its effect without there being "a hair's breadth" between perceiving and avoiding. This, then, is what counts: a lightning reaction which has no further need of conscious observation. In this respect at least the pupil makes himself independent of al conscious purpose. And that is a great gain.

What is very much more difficult and of truly

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MAY THE FORCE BE WITH YOU

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messenger delivery service or the information service. If the brain has firm control of these nervous organs, they will all work healthily and correctly. If the brain is upset, command delivery and intelligence will be too, and will seem to act anyway they please.

If you have a fever, someone merely touching your hair will send chills through your body, a slight sound will cause you to start. This is because your nerves are transmitting abnormal information. When you are in a situation filled with complexities, noise, and stimuli, your nerves exaggerate the strength of the stimuli to a point where your brain cannot bear it. When the brain weakens, the nerves become over-sensitive, and the whole vicious circle goes on, leading finally perhaps to a nervous collapse.

You can control your nerves correctly if you maintain the one point in the lower abdomen, keep your *ki* outflowing, relax your body, and stay in a natural condition. Maintain a calm state that says to your nervous system, "Let me know of big things, don't bother me with trifles," and our nerves will not bother your brain with little items like a nicked finger. It is possible to sleep in any noisy place and to have a brain that can select and judge the reports it receives from the five senses and give appropriate commands. A person who is able to do this will never trouble himself over such things as nervous breakdowns.

Now that we understand something of controlling the nervous system, let us turn our attention to the way the brain itself thinks. Simply swallowing up all the information the brain receives, would in itself lead us to being swept away by the complexities of the world. We must be able to select the necessary information and to discard what is not needed. If we ask ourselves what should we use as a standard of judgment, we see that the real problem is selecting that standard.

That standard is the rules of the universal. If you follow them, you can handle any confusion as decisively as Alexander's sword cut the Gordian knot. This is the simple path on which we can walk through the complicated world. Surely, since we have this road that lends anyone directly and simply to the land of his destination, there is no reason to willfully detour through narrow bypaths. It is good to at least reach one's destination, but the greatest tragedy is to be mistaken in the destination itself, become exhausted, and fall by the way.

We know one universal law: that the mind controls the body. In aikido, with mind and body coordinated, when we are going to throw our opponent, we first lead his mind and then send his body to the same place. For this reason, we can easily throw him. There should also be ways to easily handle, through the universal laws, the many things that come to attack us in our daily lives.

Anyone can lift something like a drinking glass because we all know that it is light. But people attempting to lift something heavy often think to themselves, "This weighs a ton," and tense themselves to pick it up. It is a good idea to look back over the things we do. By tensing yourself you are interfering with your own strength and making the things you are trying to lift seem heavier. When we are lifting a great weight, we should maintain the one point in the lower abdomen, relax, and lift the thing lightly, because this makes lifting heavy things easy. The same exactly is true of matters of this world. When you are facing some grave issue, maintain the one point in the lower abdomen, calm your spirit, and handle the question lightly. If you are tense and worried you become unable to see things, but if you calm down and look clearly at the situation you will always find that there is a way to handle it simply. For instance, when you are driving if you grip the steering wheel with all your might, it feels heavy and difficult to move. On the other hand, if you hold it lightly, you can turn it lightly at will. If you worry a great deal about having to make a speech before a large audience, your brain will stop working, your mouth will cease to move, and you will stand like a post on the stage. Under different circumstances, the same person could easily say that same thing without difficulty. It is the same as standing in front of a single friend and talking naturally, but if he worries and frets about it he cannot do even this simple thing. All one needs to do is to maintain the one point in the lower abdomen and talk as if we were talking with a friend.

Since the universal began, for better or worse, everything has a solution. Even things we call unsolvable have solutions. Since things will happen as they must, if we do all we can and remain calm and unmovable in any circumstance we have nothing to fear. Continual grumbling, dissatisfaction, worry, and rushing first here and then there are only wasted effort.

If you want to forget something, you should direct yourself entirely to something else. The brain is organized to be able to forget. You reserve all your effort for what you must remember but let the thing you want to forget be, and it will leave your mind. If you keep thinking, "I must forget, I must forget," you never will forget.

In all these examples from daily life, whatever the environment, whatever the circumstances, if you calm down, the universal's wide road, along which you can travel easily, is there. Do not give in to your surroundings. The difference between a wise man and a mediocre man is the difference between a man who uses an environment and one who lets his environment use him. Our aim should be to become calm and unmovable, decisive and settled humans. The easiest, the simplest road to follow is the universal's broad highway.

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decisive importance is the task of stopping the pupil from thinking and spying out how he can best come at his opponent. Actually, he should clear his mind of the thought that he has to do with an opponent at all and that it is a matter of life and death.

To begin with, the pupil understands these instructions—and he can hardly do otherwise—as meaning that it is sufficient for him to refrain from observing and thinking about the behavior of his opponent. He takes this non-observation very seriously and controls himself at every step. But he fails to notice that, by concentrating his attention on himself, he inevitably sees himself as the combatant who has at all costs to avoid watching his opponent. Do what he may, he still has him secretly in mind. Only in appearance has he detached himself from him, and the more he endeavors to forget him the more tightly he binds himself to him.

It takes a good deal of very subtle psychological guidance to convince the pupil that fundamentally he has gained nothing by this shift of attention. He must learn to disregard himself as resolutely as he disregards his opponent, and to become, in a radical sense, self-regardless, purposeless. Much patience, much heart-breaking practice is needed, just as in archery. But once this practice has led to the goal the last trace of self-regard vanishes in sheer purposelessness.

Perfection in the art of swordsmanship is reached, according to Takuan, when the heart is troubled by no more thought of I and You, of the opponent and his sword, of one's own sword and how to wield it—no more thought even of life and death. "All is emptiness: your own self, the flashing sword, and the arms that wield it. Even the thought of emptiness is no longer there." From this absolute emptiness, states Takuan, "comes the most wondrous unfoldment of doing."