

Spontaneity in Western Martial Arts
— A Yogācāra Critique of *Mushin* (No-Mind) —

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The martial arts, long ago developed in China, Korea, and Japan, have of late become increasingly popular in the United States. *Dōjō* for the practice of karate, *jūdō*, *aikidō*, and *kendō* have sprung up not only in major cities and graced many of their suburban malls, but even small towns in out of the way places boast martial arts training institutes. Just a few years ago the image of the stealthy, agile *ninja* warrior captured the imagination of thousands of American youths, eliciting an immediate response in the overproduction of *ninja* weapons and literature. Perhaps the turning point of this fad came a few years ago when a “*ninja*” youth, apparently believing in his personal invulnerability, attacked a policeman. With sword raised high he swooped down on the bewildered officer, who in self-defense dispatched him with a bullet from his service revolver.

Martial arts can easily be taken out of their East Asian context, shorn of all spiritual or humanistic value, and practiced merely for athletic prowess or street-smart fighting. A prime example is Bruce Lee who rejected the spiritual ethos that surrounds these arts, discarding anything that wasn't directly focused on success in combat. To make his point, he once punched a more traditional practitioner in the mouth on Hong Kong television; the man, intending to demonstrate a particularly stable stance, had merely challenged Lee

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to attempt a throw (ABDUL-JABBAR 1983, p. 187). Lee's well-delivered punch laid him out cold, right there on the electronic screen.

The moving picture "Karate Kid" (both I and II), on the other hand, stressed the difference between one who practices the martial arts as a spiritual discipline and one who uses them for selfish gain and sadistic injury to others. Under the direction of a newly found master, Daniel-san turns from being both wimpish and undisciplined to attain a well-disciplined approach to life and the ability to defeat those who misuse the martial arts.

There is no question about it: the martial arts in their Far Eastern context entail a spiritual discipline and inculcate a warrior ethos of strength and compassion. Indeed, the martial arts are only marginally useful in present-day combat. No matter how skillfully the New York *ninja* boy may have wielded his sword, he stood little chance against the policeman's revolver. The gang wars that rack inner city life are not pursued in a samurai spirit and the weapons of choice are not swords, but Saturday night specials and semi-automatic machine guns.

The ethos of the East Asian martial arts evolved in a context of Zen Buddhism and took on the contours of Buddhist teachings. The Shaolin monastery is famed as one of the central historical sources of "Buddhist" martial arts, known today by its frequent appearances in Run-Run Shaw movies and (for those who remember) through the television series "Kung-fu." The introduction of Zen into Kamakura Japan wedded Zen to the martial arts of the samurai class. This then is the ethos of traditional Eastern martial arts and derives from the broad Mahāyāna context of Buddhist doctrine.

It is, however, my contention that martial arts in the West are almost always divorced from this Mahāyāna context, even when practitioners are convinced they are engaged not only in technique but also in disciplined Buddhist insight. I argue that the spiritual ethos surrounding martial arts practice is in fact a warmed-over Taoism, quite different from Mahāyāna Buddhism.

Mushin and Spontaneity

The ethos of modern martial arts is derived from the Japanese marriage of the samurai code to Zen in Kamakura times. The central notion of Samurai Zen practice is that of no-mind (*mushin* 無心), the absence of thought that results in a spontaneous and creative

response to life situations. It is, in the words of D. T. Suzuki, a “state of unconsciousness . . . realized only when, completely empty and rid of the self, [the archer] becomes one with the perfecting of his technical skill. . . .”¹ The mind of no-mind is in “complete harmony with the principle of life itself” (SUZUKI 1959, p. 94; LEGGETT 1978, pp. 22–25). There are two points included in this notion of no-mind: the absence of thinking and the release of spontaneous creativity.

From its Indian origins, Mahāyāna Buddhism has been suspicious of the assumed validity of discursive thought. Indeed, the initial Mahāyāna teachings of the Prajñāpāramitā scriptures ridicule the pretensions of conceptual thinking and present their own mystic insights through paradoxical and perplexing statements. “A bodhisattva is a bodhisattva because there is no such thing as a bodhisattva, and that is why there is a bodhisattva,” they declare. Driven by fear of losing one’s identity and one’s place in the world, one engenders thoughts that cover over and occlude insight into the emptiness of all things, including the thinking subject. In the Prajñāpāramitā texts, the very presence of a sign or an image to be known is itself a defilement of the mind (CONZE 1975, p. 11). In the Tathāgatagarbha tradition the way toward awakening is to desist from the production of discriminative thought, letting the original luminescence of the mind shine forth (TAKASAKI 1974, pp. 397–411). The Zen rejection of discriminative thinking is then no surprise; it follows in the time-honored Mahāyāna tradition.

But the implications drawn in the Far East are distinctive, for they begin to attend to the spontaneity associated with the Buddha mind. Classical Mahāyāna texts spoke of the spontaneity (*anabhoga*) of the Buddha, his effortless accomplishment of the tasks of compassion. Such spontaneity is one of the profundities of Dharma body treated in the *Mahāyānasamgraha* (ASAṄGA 1989, 1.1.). Yet in India the attainment of spontaneity was apparently limited to a Buddha, to those rare awakened ones who, after three aeons of uninterrupted practice, have attained supreme perfect awakening. Spontaneity was not applied to more mundane endeavors. Indeed, Indian texts see agriculture and craft as avaricious employments that result from bad karma, not as opportunities for creativity. This changes in China, due probably both to late Indian Buddhist insistence on achieving

¹ See his Introduction to HERRIGEL 1973, p. 10.

awakening in one's present existence and to the ancient tradition of Taoist philosophy. Chuang-tzu celebrates the inner harmony of farmers and craftsmen. Taoist engagement in physical labor and trade endeavors are preferred over the staid Confucian intellectual who, despite his best intentions—or rather because of them—injures the original nature of human beings. Chuang-tzu's butcher is so in tune with the Tao that, even after eighteen years, his knife retains its original sharpness. Never failing to find the empty spaces between the joints of the animal being carved, it never becomes dull (WATSON 1968, pp. 50–51). Chinese Buddhists linked the notion of the pure mind of no thinking, inherited from the Indian, especially the Tathāgatagarbha, tradition, with the indigenous Taoist theme of the inborn nature with its sense of concrete craftsmanship and earthy creativity (NEEDHAM 1956, vol. 2, pp. 89–98, 120–126).

One imagines that the first monks at Shaolin monastery (if indeed that is where Zen first was joined to martial arts) learned defense not because of any religious impulse, but for the quite practical need to defend themselves. Their Zen was expressed through their craft, but in time the craft itself was seen as a path to the realization of the mind of no-mind. Taoist spontaneity comes to be associated with awakening. In Japan, the Kamakura samurai practiced martial arts as a path toward awakening. Takuan's letter to Yagyū Tajima no Kami Munenori presents swordsmanship as a path of wisdom (*prajñā*; SUZUKI 1959, pp. 95; LISHKA 1978, pp. 145–156). Here, however, the practice of martial arts is not itself a sufficient practice; it must be accompanied by breathing exercises and traditional meditation.

It is this blend of the Indian notion of no-mind, i. e., the abandonment of discriminative thinking, with the Chinese Taoist focus on concrete creativity that formed the Zen culture of the martial arts. The shock at a Bruce Lee denigrating anything but efficient technique, and the picturing of the "bad guys" as those well-trained in technique (*ji* 事) only, without having understood the inner spirit (*ri* 理) which lies behind these arts and to which they lead, witness to the vitality of this spiritual tradition.

Mushin and Emptiness

Suzuki presents a medieval Japanese *waka* poem on *mushin* which equates it with emptiness beyond the everyday illusions of discrim-

inative thinking.

Into a soul (*kokoro*) absolutely free from
thoughts and emotions,
Even the tiger finds no room to insert
its fierce claws.

.....

Some think that striking is to strike:
But striking is not to strike, nor is killing to kill.
He who strikes and he who is struck –
They are both no more than a dream that has no reality.
No thinking, no reflecting, –
Perfect emptiness:
Yet therein something moves,
Following its own course.

.....

Victory is for the one,
Even before the combat,
Who has no thought of himself,
Abiding in the no-mind-ness of Great Origin

(SUZUKI 1959, p. 123).

Emptiness here is seen as a field wherein “something moves, following its own course.” In the Indian schools, emptiness is simply the absence of essence, co-terminous with dependent co-arising. It is not a latent source of anything. The positive thrust of Mahāyāna comes not from attributing some mysterious “being” to emptiness, but from its identification by Nāgārjuna with dependent co-arising. Yet here emptiness, the attainment of no thinking and no reflecting, i. e., *mushin*, is itself the field of inner victory, engendering a creativity of swordsmanship that moves along its own spontaneous course.

When Chinese Buddhist thinkers first came upon the notion of emptiness, they equated it with “original nonbeing” (*pen-wu* 本無), as understood in the Taoist tradition. Emptiness became the fecund non-being from which all being comes (WU 1982, p. 76–78), the empty center of Lao-tzu’s wheel that allowed the spokes to function. This early interpretation of emptiness was soon seen as inadequate and thinkers such as Chih-i reclaimed the Madhyāmika notion of emptiness as identified with dependent co-arising, entailing a mutual tension between the two truths of worldly convention and ultimate meaning (see NAGAO 1989, pp. 21–31; SWANSON 1989). Yet, although the notion of emptiness was distinguished from the Taoist notion

of non-being, the sense of this world as harmoniously coming from nonbeing was retained and equated with the spontaneity of harmonious and awakened action issuing from the pure mind of no-mind.

In the Indian Tathāgatagarbha tradition, realization of the original mind was attained by the cessation of defiling thought. But here, the original mind is explicitly identified as not empty (*aśūnya*; WAYMAN 1974, p. 99). All the defilements are empty and non-existent, but the originally pure mind is not empty. In fact, it is the truly existent, and the true center of all action and all true awakening (MAITREYA, p. 58). Samurai Zen similarly understood emptiness in a centrist fashion as the true mind, from which we depart by discriminative thinking and to which we return by awakening. The mind of emptiness is not simply a mind that understands emptiness, i. e. dependent co-arising, but a mind freed from entangling thoughts and concepts, and pregnant with spontaneous potential. It is the mind sought by not seeking, the mind experienced only by direct intuition. And it is the mind of emptiness that, once attained, can dispense with the illusions of life in the world.

The danger is that such a centering on the pure mind can entail a forgetfulness not only of discriminative concepts, but also of the dependently co-arisen world. Takuan Sōhō Zenji presents a vision of a detached and aloof practitioner who realizes a head-chopping variety of emptiness:

The uplifted sword has no will of its own, it is all of emptiness. It is like a flash of lightning. The man who is about to be struck down is also of emptiness, as is the one who wields the sword. . . . Do not get your mind stopped with the sword you raise, forget about what you are doing, and strike the enemy. Do not keep your mind on the person before you. They are all of emptiness, but beware of your mind being caught in emptiness (AITKEN 1984, p. 5).

As Robert Aitken remarks, such an argument dispenses with any awareness of ethical action in the world. It constructs a Zen aloof from human concern and only tenuously aware of the need for compassion. Compassion, it is argued, will follow spontaneously upon the attainment of the pure mind. But what about the mind yet unawakened? The implicit message that one can dispense with compassion until awakened makes that awakening a transcendent phenomenon, quite distant from one's everyday mind.

Yogācāra Notions of the Mind and its Spontaneity

The Yogācāra philosophy of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu turned Indian Buddhist attention toward a critique of consciousness. But that critique did not discover any originally pure mind. Rather, it identified the empirical activities of sensing, perception, and thinking, and contrasted them with a preconscious container consciousness that carries the defiled karmic seeds from past actions and impels one into a parallel karmic future. The *Samdhinirmocana-sūtra* describes this container consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*) as a preconscious, bodily awareness that both goes before and structures subsequent thinking and action, and that is, in turn, simultaneously structured by those actions. The container consciousness serves as the continuum for samsaric transmigration, driving on toward the appropriation of the body and language. The relevant passage says:

Viśālamati, you should understand that sundry sentient beings fall into sundry destinies in their transmigration through the six destinies. Whether egg-born, womb-born, moisture-born, or magically born, they issue from birth. From the very first moment [of their birth], the maturation, evolution, unification, increase, and growth of their minds, together with all their seeds, depend on two appropriations. The first is their appropriation of the material senses with the body. The second is their appropriation of the propensity toward verbal fabrication in discriminating images and words. . . . Viśālamati, this consciousness is also termed the appropriating consciousness because it is taken up together with the body. It is termed the container consciousness because it joins itself to and lies hidden [in that body] in a common security and risk. It is termed mind because it mines and accumulates material forms, sounds, odors, tastes, and touches.²

Here samsaric existence results not only from discriminative thinking, but also and primarily from the appropriation of the body with its senses. The basic underlying awareness that results in *samsāra* is precisely that which appropriates the body: being taken up with it and united to it in common security and risk. The container consciousness is bodily consciousness, accumulating sense impressions and images and tending toward verbal fabrication (*prapañca*) and discriminative thought. The Yogācāra description differs markedly

² *Samdhinirmocana-sūtra*, trans. by John P. Keenan (forthcoming in the translation series of the Bukkyō Dendō Kyōkai).

from the notion of a pristine and originally pure mind clouded over by discriminative thinking. Here, even if no discrimination occurs (as in unconscious states), samsaric defilement nevertheless obtains, for the preconscious and yet undiscriminating *ālaya* remains karmically defiled.

In this doctrinal context awakening occurs only when one has realized a conversion of the basis, a turning around of the bodily basis of consciousness. It is not enough simply to abstain from discrimination, and no realization of non-conceptual, bodily spontaneity suffices: one would still be enmeshed in ignorance and karmic entanglement. No direct, linear intuition into the nature of mind leads to enlightenment. Rather insight into the structure and nature of consciousness results in meditational and philosophic awareness of consciousness as defiled and intensifies the exigency for a total reversal of that consciousness through conversion.

Yogācāra texts do speak of spontaneity, but understand it not to be a recovery of one's inborn nature, but an attribute of awakening. Asaṅga's *Mahāyānasamgraha* includes spontaneity among the first of the profundities of the Dharma Body. Asvabhāva comments that:

[Asaṅga's] statement that "[Buddha] does everything spontaneously" refers to the profundity of his action. [This means that Buddhas] act effortlessly for the benefit of sentient beings, just like a mani-jewel or the heavenly music (ASAṅGA 1989, I.I.).

The Maitreyan *Mahāyānasūtralamkāra* presents the same theme:

Just as sound that may come from gongs that have not been struck, so the Victor gives teaching without effort. Just as the mani-jewel shows forth its radiance, so also Buddhas spontaneously show forth their actions (MAITREYA 1987, p. 166).

Here spontaneity refers to the effortless nature of Buddha actions that flow from the complete absence of karmic defilement. Spontaneity characterizes the conversion of consciousness from its preconscious defiled state to wisdom, not simply the absence of conceptual, discriminative thinking.

In the above description of Samurai Zen, emptiness is identical with no-mind. It is the pure source from which creativity and spontaneity issue. Yet in the Yogācāra texts emptiness indicates the absence of essence, the non-being of the illusory pattern of imagining essences to be real. In the Yogācāra context of the three patterns of conscious awareness, the entities clung to in the imagined pattern

are declared to be nonexistent and empty, while the dependently co-arisen being of the other-dependent pattern is affirmed to exist. Indeed, this other-dependent being is the being of nonbeing, the affirmation of a dependently co-arising existence that has passed through the negation of essences. Emptiness is then not a pure source for anything; it is simply the other-dependent pattern in its originally dependently co-arisen validity (see NAGAO 1989, pp. 85–120).

A Yogācāra Critique of the Martial Arts

This Yogācāra critique of the Ch'an doctrine of no-mind which lies behind the practice of the martial arts may appear to draw too sharp a distinction between Indian Mahāyāna thought, in its Yogācāra form, and Ch'an Buddhism, with its teaching on the original mind of no-mind. There are in fact any number of Indian texts that thematize the originally pure mind and this teaching becomes almost the dominant assumption of Chinese Buddhism. In particular, the texts translated by and associated with the Indian translator Paramārtha show a clear affinity for the doctrine of an intrinsic Buddha nature inherent in all sentient beings. The idea of the originally pure mind does have an illustrious pedigree!

Yet, in its indigenous context, both Indian and Chinese, the teaching of Buddha nature and no-mind is not meant to be taken literally. It is not an affirmation of a monistic reality lying behind phenomena. It is not a brahmanic essence, in light of which the slaughter of brothers and cousins in battle is to be deemed insignificant (MILLER 1986, pp. 31–39). It is rather a primal myth for the inner potential of each and every person to attain awakening. As William Grosnick argues, it is a primal myth that proclaims truth beyond the range of discursive thought, the truth that each and every being has the potential to attain awakening and become a buddha. It is an affirmation, in symbolic images and terms, of the actuality of such a potential (GROSNICK, forthcoming). It is not simply that the Indian and Chinese Buddhists could not state in clear terms what I have just stated above: that all beings have the potential to attain awakening. Rather, that statement, by the very fact of its discursive nature (*prapañca*), sets the goal of Buddhahood apart from the practitioner. A myth, by contrast, takes on its meaning only in the context of practice and only in terms of the concrete living of an

actual practitioner.

This becomes apparent in the Ch'an teachings. The famous kōan of Chiao-chou answers the question, "Does a dog have Buddha-nature?" with a simple and plain "No!" Many Ch'an practitioners have wrestled long with this particular kōan and it is by definition beyond definition. But from a Yogācāra philosophical perspective, it clearly sounds like a negation of any literal affirmation of Buddha nature. The question itself is highly scholastic, dealing not with concrete practitioners of *zazen*, but with dogs! How does it really affect the endeavors of the meditator to know whether dogs too might attain awakening? It resembles the Christian scholastic quandary about the numbers of angels who can fit on the head of a pin. Buddha nature as primal myth does not affirm the literal reality of any pure mind. Rather it embodies and enfleshes in a powerful and overarching image the inner potential for awakening. You too may, in actual fact, become a buddha! To worry about whether or not your pet dog can also be awakened probably indicates that you are too attached to your dog.

No doubt in China such a notion as no-mind was readily accepted because of its affinity with Taoist ideas about one's inborn nature (*hsing*).³ In the Chinese, Korean, and Japanese contexts such a doctrine went hand in hand with the actual practice of meditation. The insistence on meditation practice guarded against any literal grasping after the pure mind. In Samurai Zen, technical expertise was not enough; the warrior must also sit in meditation. In modern Japan, where many practice one or another of the Zen "ways" without bothering about the accompanying meditation, the cultural pattern clearly identifies such a "way" as merely technique, falling far short of any experience of awakening.

Bereft of such a cultural horizon, martial arts in the West have for the most part been practiced simply for the martial skills derived thereby. But even when seen as spiritual disciplines, in the absence of the Japanese cultural context, a mistake occurs here that would scarcely be made in Japan: a martial art is thought itself to issue in wondrous spontaneity and to embody the mind of no-mind that is awakening. This is, I submit, a confusion. The spontaneity experienced by practitioners of a martial art need have no connection with the spontaneity of Buddha action. The no-mind experienced

³ See Chuang Tzu, *Outer Chapters* in Watson 1968.

need have nothing to do with Mahāyāna understandings of emptiness, or with the attainment of the Buddha mind.

In a Yogācāra context, an experience of no-mind, of no discriminative thinking, may indeed be simply a direct awareness of defiled ālaya consciousness. And this would not negate its efficacy in terms of lightning-quick action and performance. Indeed, in any sport, discursive thinking only gets in the way of actual performance. That is why there are coaches: their job is to analyze and plan. The players themselves “play” best when they act on instinct, learned instinct perhaps, but instinct nevertheless. Sadaharu Oh would not have hit so many home runs if he had to analyze the pitches as they came to him. Only spontaneous response enabled him to perform so brilliantly. Painters engage most creatively in their art when discriminative thinking is held in abeyance. Étienne Gilson describes a painter’s knowledge as present in his hands, not in his head (GILSON 1955, pp. 51–55). The spontaneity of a *kendō* practitioner comes indeed from the mind of no-mind, from his or her ability to act from the body, and not to have to process reactions through the mind. No adept swordsman has time to perform such a processing. “Body English” is much more important than verbal English.

But body awareness is itself simply an awareness of the defiled ālaya consciousness. It authenticates no true awakening. Indeed, well-accomplished and graceful athletes who are personally self-centered and prideful are not unusual. Even when one is engaged in quiet meditation and breathing exercises, even when one is in rhythm with the body and can act spontaneously, there is no guarantee of insight into awakening. This is more a Taoist practice of bypassing discursive thinking in favor of relaxed and creative non-action (*wu-wei*)—that non-action that leaves nothing undone—than the Mahāyāna practice of the path.

The authentication of awakening is found not in being spontaneous and in touch with one’s body. Rather it is characterized, as the texts repeat again and again, by wisdom and compassion. It is awareness of emptiness and ultimate meaning constantly in dynamic and healthy tension with the conventional tasks of compassion in the dependently co-arisen world that characterize the mind of awakening. No matter how many arrows find the center of the target, no matter how much “no-effort” attains its goal, without the compassionate engagement of bodhisattva action in the world one remains aloof and unengaged, as did Takuan’s swordsman. For him, an inept

apprehension of emptiness was one that hindered the swift and natural fall of his sword. I would argue that the inept apprehension of emptiness was one that failed to notice the neck beneath the sword.

Conclusion

My conclusion consists in a caveat and a recommendation. The caveat is that one avoid talking about martial arts in mystic terms, as if skill at karate involved spiritual attainment. The recommendation is to broaden the horizon of martial arts to include other athletic and craft endeavors. Although the dropping off of conceptual, discriminative thought is not itself awakening, it is a step in the right direction, a step that can be taken in any art, craft, or sport. In Vermont, where I live, many practice the Taoist art of skiing. They talk of becoming one with the course, of dropping off their minds and their legs in the run down the mountain, in reacting without thought to the moguls that suddenly jump up during the run, of being one with the mountain. One of my students wrote a paper on *Frisbie-dō*, the Tao of being spontaneously in harmony with the gliding motions of frisbie play. Another talks about rhythm in golf and the need to avoid conceptualizing one's swing. Yet others write about the harmonious Tao of kayaking or wind-surfing. One even claimed that the total exhilaration of mogul skiing surpasses sexual intercourse, for it is immune to all thought and fantasy. One's mind must be empty and focused entirely on the run.

These Taoist themes have traditionally been part and parcel of martial arts in East Asia. I recommend that they be recognized as Taoist and not identified with the attainment of the Buddha mind. They may indeed be practices that tend toward insight and awareness, but the Buddha Dharma is more than that, much more than that.

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