

Pathways

THE CHRIS DEWEY MARTIAL ARTS, INC. NEWSLETTER

VOLUME 15 ISSUE 3

SUMMER I 2011



CONTENTS

Form.....	1
Form cont'd.....	2
Opportunity.....	3
Neural nets.....	4

*Nature does nothing
without purpose*

Aristotle

© 2011 Chris Dewey Martial Arts, Inc.

Form

When I was in grad school, my dissertation supervisor had me read a book concerning ecology. It was D'Arcy's classic treatise on Growth and Form. The book was one of those mind expanding tomes that makes you question all the things you thought you knew....or at least, took for granted. So fast forward thirty some years and add some nifty martial arts experiences and a bonfire (I'll explain that in minute), and you have the makings of a really good newsletter article about form.

It is rare for me to be idle. That is to say, even when I am doing something seemingly mundane, I make use of the opportunity by studying the moment and watching for clues to understanding.

Today, our entire family was busy in the garden. Janet was cutting, pruning and trimming. Graham was hauling using his tractor, and I was responsible for incineration of the excess foliage. Truckloads of it!

If you have ever built and watched a bonfire, you will know how wonderfully hypnotic they can be, especially once they really get going and are alive with flame.

So as I watched the flames I was aware of being fully present and I entered a contemplative state, which I then allowed to become meditative. The art of being mindful is to be present in the moment. The art of meditation is to watch your thoughts, but not cling to them. Acknowledge and let go, acknowledge and release...easier said than done.

As I watched the flames I followed their shapes, their transience, their

composition, color, their energy, and I noticed how each flame was so utterly complete in itself, needing nothing to be anything other than what it was. The study of flames made me think about doing martial arts techniques, which quickly led me to a consideration of form in the martial arts. I didn't chase the thoughts, I simply followed where they led and observed their promptings.

When we study form in the martial arts, it can generally arouse a bunch of different responses, and can even provoke a decent argument between people of differing perspectives.

For the sake of creating a base position, let's say that Form is a pre-arranged set of moves designed to teach a particular set of skills.

Would that it were that simple!

If you go to a typical martial arts tournament you will rarely see a traditional karate form performed without embellishment, and you will even see students penalized for doing the form exactly as it is written. Flashy sells. Flashy forms allow us to show off what we can do. Embellished forms win big trophies, so in a way, we actively encourage our students to change the forms we teach them. If you go to a Judo tournament and watch form competition, it is something of a different beast. If you change the form from the 'expected' or 'approved' version, you will be penalized, heavily. At Judo tournaments conformity sells. You generally don't get big trophies either...you normally get a medal on a ribbon. So what?

Call me a purist, but I'm not con-

Form = Kata

vinced that we are supposed to be practicing form in order to win medals, trophies or the approval of spectators.

So let's go to a class setting, where an instructor is teaching form. In my experience there are normally three groups of students present: There will be those students who want to get the thing right and work hard on making sure each move is faithful to what is expected. There will be those students who resist learning form because it either lacks practicality from their perspective, or it is boring, or it is rigid. There will also be those students present who want to change the form they are taught because they think they can improve it.

I know this because I have been all of these students at one point or another in my own journey.

Learning form is about learning understanding. I have discovered in each style of martial arts that I have learned, that form exists to teach very specific things and that often those things are not immediately apparent. In fact, a lot of times, the real lessons of the forms we learn (lets call them kata..since that's the Japanese word for it) do not reveal themselves until we have done thousands of repetitions with an empty cup at the beginning of each repetition. That's difficult!

I have been taught kata by instructors who really didn't know what they were doing, or why they were doing it...they had learned by rote and re-

peated by rote, but there was no deep understanding. I have also been taught by some truly gifted and insightful martial artists, who not only saw the jewel in the form, but had the wisdom to point students towards discovering the jewel for themselves. For my own path of learning, both sorts of instructors have been necessary. I have learned from both and am grateful for both.

When we practice kata, I believe that it is critical that we study the root form. Get as close to original kata as is possible. I didn't understand this years ago, but I see it a little more clearly now. Kata reveals its secrets slowly over time, and not all at once. Each kata contains biomechanical, energetic, philosophical, psychological and spiritual secrets. Every time you practice kata with an open mind, an open heart and an empty cup, you will invariably walk away wiser....not necessarily right away, but it will come. Trust me.

There is also a yin and a yang aspect to learning kata.

The yin aspect to learning kata is that much that should have been remembered, has been lost by successive generations of students and teachers. One place we see this most clearly is in the Shotokan kata, where bunkai are the combat reasons for a particular move. Needless to say, the bunkai interpretations vary from one instructor to another, and I for one, am not wise enough to tell you what the correct interpretation should be....I am

too far removed from the original designer of the form to know. We also see it in Judo where several of the more obscure katas, like Koshiki No Kata (Form of Antiquity), are often taught without any understanding of what they really mean. All of us are too far removed from the true combat environment of the samurai warrior.

The yang aspect to learning kata is that change brings with it the possibility of innovation and avoids the risk of stagnation. Study and innovation brings the possibility of discovery and insight. And these are all good things. The tricky bit is to bring change through the use of kime, not through the frustrations of ignorance or the promptings of ego.

There are very valid reasons for including kata in our training. Just as there are very valid reasons for including technical drill training and free-fighting (sparring, randori).

When kata takes on a rigid, stony quality of repetition for repetition's sake, then we have lost the meaning. When we do the repetitions for the sake of deeper insight through meditative attention to action, then all manner of learning opportunities emerge.

It has taken me forty years to figure this out. I'm apparently a slow learner. It is my hope that you will draw benefit from these words and learn more rapidly than did I.

Kata awaits, and not without reason.

☺

"Nature does nothing without purpose."

Aristotle

(yeah I know I used this quote last month, but it fits)

Opportunity

Opportunity is an interesting thing. First off, and most obviously, if you don't see an opportunity for what it is, you don't see an opportunity. For something to be an opportunity, you have to see it. That's your **first clue**. In order to see opportunities, you need to be awake and aware.

The **second clue** is how our actions control the opportunities that come to us. One of the lessons that I have attempted to teach my son, is that often opportunities disappear because we choose to act in a particular way, which changes the response of someone around us.

Take the opportunity for learning, for instance. I will go out of my way for any student who is willing to work hard. I will spend untold hours working with a student who truly wants to learn, regardless of their level of ability or previous knowledge; but conversely, I have little time for students who simply want to know "what's going to be on the test."

As another example: As I grew up in the martial arts, many of my instructors, especially the oriental ones or those who had trained extensively in the orient, were almost brutal in their criticisms of my technique. It was only as I became an instructor in my own right, that I discovered that traditional instructors tend to pick on the smallest details with those students who they think have potential, or who seem to be worthwhile. Interestingly

enough, even as an instructor, those mentors who still guide my growth continue the brutal dissection of the smallest thing that I could improve....and for that, I have become very thankful. It keeps us humble to know that there is always room for improvement.

As Mark Barlow, the head of our Akayama Ryu Ju Jitsu system points out so eloquently, at almost every camp or clinic...The other side to that coin, is that students who think they know it all are rarely corrected.

It's the opportunity of the empty cup. Every student who shows up to class with an empty cup will have the opportunity to go home with a cup full of learning opportunities. Any student who shows up to class with a full cup has the opportunity to empty the cup and learn, or go home with the same cup filled with the same stuff....it's a choice. When he talked about the empty cup, Bruce Lee was merely echoing the sentiments of countless thousands of instructors for thousands of years across multiple disciplines.

The **third clue** is that opportunities are only offered so many times, before they stop getting offered. Those who seek, and take advantage of opportunity, will generally be offered more, those who don't, won't. Let's say I need part of my house fixed. I offer you the opportunity to do some work on the house and you take it, and do a good job. The chances are fairly good

that the next time a similar opportunity appears I will actively seek you out and offer the opportunity to you, first. There are several reasons for this: firstly, I know you will do a good job, so you are reliable and competent. Secondly, I don't have to waste my time looking for someone who is reliable and competent, I already know someone.

Conversely, if you do a poor job and I have to hire someone else to fix the mess you made, then I will a) never use you again and b) warn others about your shoddy work. The timeliness and quality of your work will determine the number of opportunities that come your way.

Equally, if I send you a message about the opportunity and you do not respond, I will find someone who does. The point here, is your **fourth clue**. Opportunities are about timing. You may be the ideal person for a particular task, but if I can't get my message through to you that I have an opportunity for you, then it makes no difference....the opportunity will be given to someone else.

So to summarize:

- Clue 1: Awareness of opportunity
- Clue 2: Initial actions affect opportunity
- Clue 3: Quality of response affects repeat opportunities
- Clue 4: Timing of offer/response. ☺

*"It is our attitude towards events, not events themselves,
which we can control"*

Epictetus

Neural Nets

Last month, I talked a little about the concept of Mushin (mind of no mind). This month, I want to talk about being unconscious.

Mushin is about being in a state of flow, which is a powerful mental state of awareness and action that supersedes conscious thought.

Being unconscious in our actions is something else entirely.

When we are unconscious we act without thinking. Actually, a better way to put it would be to say that we think without awareness.

Let me give you an example. Yesterday, we took one of our children from the dojo to her first Judo tournament. As I sat there in the bleachers as her coach, I was *re-minded* of my past matches as a competitor. Once the matches got started, I was re-minded of my life as a referee.

In the words of Robert Louis Stevenson, from "*Treasure Island*", "I remembered it as if it were yesterday." The memories were as strong as they always were, the emotions were all still there, the wins, losses, the great moments, the not so great moments.

Let's look at that the other word...*re-member*. When we dismember something, we take it apart. When we re-member something, we put it back together again. This is how I am re-minded of things. When I am re-minded, I put my mind back into the condition it was in during the event I am re-remembering. In essence I am re-building all the links in all the brain cells that act together to remind me of the event...I see the mental images, hear the sounds, remember the smells...it's all there, com-

pletely unchanged.

These are our memories.

Now, the bit of the process that I want to get to is that the whole process of re-remembering and re-remembering myself happened automatically...I didn't *think* about it. I walked into the same room in which I had competed and refereed so many times before, and it all came back, just like it was. It just happened.

We do this all the time. We play our memories all day long, as triggers set them off, one after another. In essence we live our present by remembering the past.

Actually, it's important that we do so. Every time I eat an orange, for instance, I am re-minded and re-remembering my experiences of eating an orange in the past in the decision making-process of whether I want to eat it now. But take it one stage further. It's important that I re-cognize an orange as an orange and not confuse it with...say...a cucumber. But what of eating the orange?

Maybe I am eating a Satsuma orange and I am re-minded of Christmas in England, because that was the only time I recall eating a Satsuma as a kid. I re-remember the living room in the home in which I was a boy, and a whole cascade of memories and emotions pour through me...some of them are good, some not so good. Do you see what just happened? The orange has nothing to do with the home in which I was a little boy, but in my brain a whole series of events is triggered by something totally unrelated.

If I keep re-remembering a specific

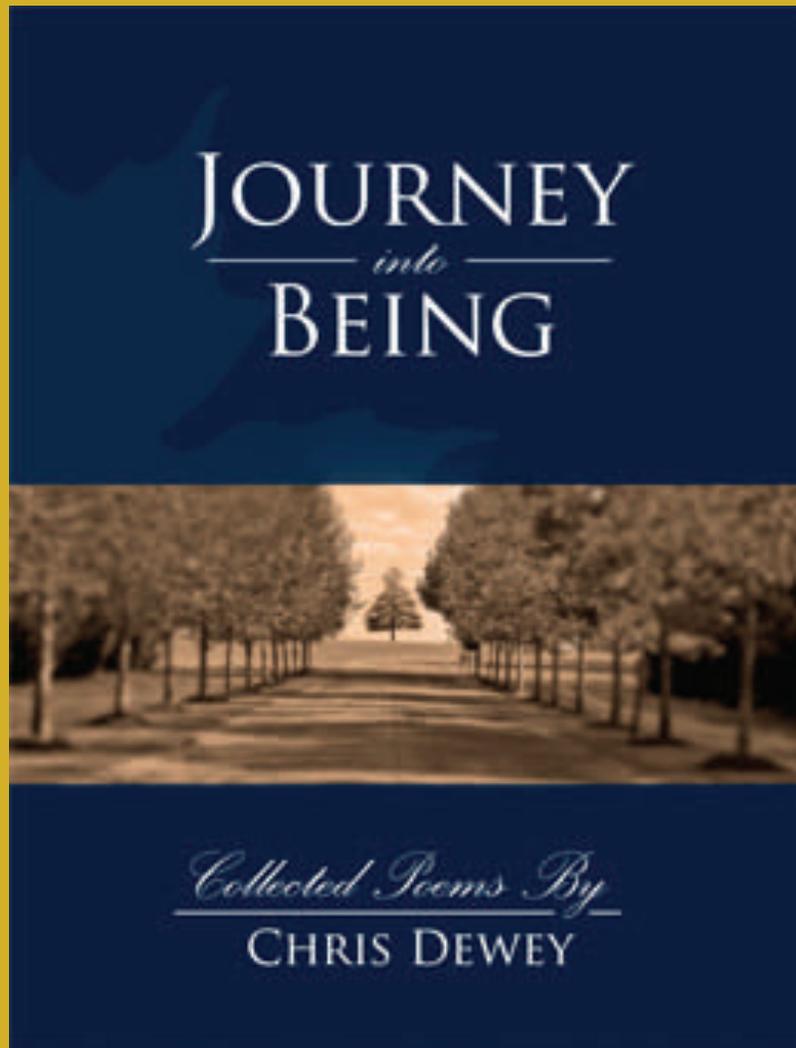
thing every time I eat an orange, sooner or later, the practice of re-remembering will be automatic and every time I eat a Satsuma, I will associate it with the specific event. For me, when I eat a Satsuma, I think about Christmas, and I think about the Christmas trees that my dad used to decorate...the image of the Christmas tree in living room is the memory trigger and from there my memories could take any number of turns.

We begin to associate unrelated things and events with emotions and responses. As I write this article (and it didn't happen yesterday), I am reminded of my very first judo match, that I lost by the way, at the age of maybe 13, in less than ten seconds. All I remember was the white canvas mat, the Seoi Nage with which I was thrown...and a woman sitting on the side lines knitting a yellow scarf as I sailed through the air. All she said was "Oh, the poor sod." That's it. The entire memory, still as fresh today as it was then.

What I'm getting at here is that the brain links our neurons together to create our world and creates neural nets for us.

We either get trapped by those very same nets, or we use them to become aware of how we are using our brains...and how we interpret the world around us.

Re-remember your brain is your only link to the world of experience. We interpret everything that happens through the neural networks that we create. Be *aware* of what you do.



Make it a great summer. Ask about our summer specials for martial arts classes

For information about classes, books and seminars contact us at 323 5522 or smaa@starkvillemartialarts.com