

# Pathways

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**"The freedom to do your best,  
means nothing unless you are  
willing to do your best."**

—Colin Powell

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## The Beatles

It would be fair to say that my musical tastes extend from the early 1700's to the 1970's and then tail off dramatically. So, every once in a while you'll find me listening to groups like The Beatles and recently one of the lines from 'Strawberry Fields' has been running through my mind....a lot.

The line goes like this: "*Living is easy, with eyes closed, misunderstanding all you see...*"

I wonder how often we do this. How often is reality colored by our perceptions of what we think we see or know, or what we want to see or know? How often do we deliberately misconstrue reality to avoid seeing something painful or unwanted?

Seeing our world or events, through different eyes is not an easy thing to do. How is it that we can come to see the world as it truly is? Do any of us really do this? Ever?

Our view of reality is colored by our experiences and since we are each unique in our experiences we see the world in different ways.

One of the reasons that I meditate is to work on putting aside my experiential prejudices and my sense of being right. I do not see life as it is, I see life as I think it is. When I sit in silence and watch, the world comes to me without my filters affecting the view...well, that is the intent at least. As I said last month, this is one of the reasons that I go to nature to sit. Nature is completely ambivalent about my desires, I have no power to affect the movement of the trees or the growth of their leaves...all I can do is sit and watch. Sit and watch...and learn. Nature has lessons for me, if I

am willing to be a student.

One of the problems with being a student, however, is that we often think we know better than our teachers. We think that we know best what we need, but as I have said before: You don't know, what you don't know you don't know. The quote applies here.

If you think that your view of life is the right view of life, how could you possibly think that you might be misunderstanding all you see?

But like many of life's lessons, this one too, is a double-edged sword. If you continually doubt yourself, how can you get anything done? How can you make any decisions? How can you know the right path ahead?

The answer of course, is to live with the benefit of as many people in mind as possible.

Jigoro Kano, the founder of Judo (I keep coming back to this guy, don't I?), talked about mutual benefit and welfare and if we live with this concept in mind, it makes us stop and think about other people's opinions before we act. It is very hard to live a life in this way; being ready to admit that we are not right and that our views are clouded at best or possibly incorrect. There will be times when we *are* right and circumstances show us to be right. But equally there will be times when we are not so right.

All that any of us can do is live with honesty and integrity in so far as is possible. Be true to your core beliefs and recognize that not everyone will agree with you. Rather than shut them out, try to see things from their perspective also.

## Clinging

The concept of holding on to things is an interesting one in the martial arts from so many perspectives. The first and most obvious aspect of clinging to things is that the tighter our grip becomes, the more inflexible we become both in the mind and in the body.

In Ju Jitsu and Judo we employ a principle called 'Adversarial Psychology', which says that when someone attacks you, whatever you want is the exact opposite of what they want. The way this plays out in reality is that if an attacker grabs my wrist and I pull away, the attacker will sense my desire to escape and pull back. At this point, I can use my attacker's pull, flow with his or her energy and add my push to the attacker's pull, enabling me to escape. The more insistent the grip, the easier it is to use the principle. All too often in Judo practice, we resist each other and lose the ability to flow both in our minds and our bodies. At such times we are often blind to the intent of our training partners and are easily thrown or pinned in free practice.

It is the same in life, we cling to things as if we truly own them. We talk about our possessions as though they are truly ours, but in reality, don't things and people pass through our lives? Things and people pass through our lives for a time and are gone. Nothing is permanent. We keep nothing, eventually we do not even keep our own lives. In that sense, therefore, it seems foolish to cling to things as though they *were* permanent.

Understand that I am not telling you that people and things cannot be precious to us, but I am suggesting to you that the perception of possession is illusory.

As a geologist and ecologist, I can apply this idea to my own being. Every atom in my body is in a constant state of flux. In very real terms, I am not the person I was last year....every atom in my body has been replaced. Every draught of air I take in replaces the one before it. Every meal I eat replaces worn out cells with new growth. I am constantly being re-grown.

Using another example; as a parent, I talk about 'my' son, as if he is mine...but he is not a possession. I don't own him. He has his own life to live and the more that I cling to him, the more he will resist and eventually resent me. He has his own life to live and must find his own path, free to make his own decisions, unencumbered by my desires for him or my opinions about him.

I have seen this aspect of clinging a lot with my advisees on campus. All too often students who are struggling with a particular degree track tell me that they are following a path because it was somehow expected of them. One of the great gifts that my parents gave to me, was the freedom to choose my own path. My father always hoped I would become an accountant or an engineer, but he never once stood in my way when I said I wanted to become a geologist. That was a truly precious gift.

I guess that it would be true to say that I learned a lot from the lesson that my parents offered me and the lesson was reinforced by the impermanence that I see through the eyes of the geologist that I became. Time changes everything in both the long and the short term. Nothing is permanent, not even the rocks or the planet. By comparison to the immensity of the Arrow of Time, what am I, to think that I can *own* any-

thing? The Arrow of Time and the train of events began long before I got here, and will continue long after I am gone.

Martial arts continued to reinforce the lesson of letting things go. The more I cling to an idea or a grip in my training, the more rigid my mind becomes, the more inflexible my body becomes and the more easily I am defeated in free practice. How often do I need to learn *that* particular lesson?

The net result of the awareness of clinging, is that I am grateful for what I '*have*' at any given moment in my life, but constantly remind myself that none of it is '*mine*' to '*keep*'. By trying to live this way, I teach myself (albeit slowly) not to take things for granted, and I learn to let things go in their time.

It is not an easy thing to do.

Remember what I said about letting nature come to me when I sit in the woods? The same principle applies here. The more I go thrashing about in the woods, or chasing after things to photograph, the less I am likely to see. The more I *want* to see, the less I will actually see. If I sit and wait, nature will go about its business around me and I will be able to take pictures. When I chase about, nature is still going about its business, but I am too wrapped up in what I want to see nature for what it is.

Over time, therefore, I have come to believe that it is our desires and our fears that make us cling, and yet in reality, the more we cling to things, the less we can actually hold. It is not an easy path to walk in life, but I believe that when we respect freedom and do not cling we honor this thing we call life. ☺

## Storms

Have you ever been at sea or sat on a cliff during a howling storm?

When I lived in Atlantic Canada I used to love to sit on the cliffs and watch the storms roll in off the ocean.

I was in awe of the pure energy, the raw power of nature to overcome any resistance. I used to sit there and think about the water in the waves, the nature of the sea itself and its inhabitants. I miss those times.

Living in Mississippi I have experienced some pretty powerful storms, after they have rolled in land and been awed by their residual power, but they have never touched the same parts of me as feeling an Atlantic storm as it hits the shore.

During the storm, everything seems to be in turmoil, there seems to be no safe haven. And then...after the storm, the waves are quiet, the surface of the ocean is calm, as though the storm had never happened. The ocean goes about its business as it has always done....imperturbable.

Let's take a deeper look.

Go beneath the storm, beneath the waves being churned up by the power of the storm, what of the water beneath?

Beneath the waters that are agitated and disturbed by the storm, no matter how strong it is, there are deeper levels of the ocean that are

unaffected. It is the deeper part of the ocean that is silent, not the surface. The surface is all about change and turmoil, sunshine and storms. The deep ocean is all about silence, immutability and stability.

I believe that there is a lesson here. In meditation we go below the surface of the self to the still, quiet parts of our being where all is as it is and needs no comment or thought.

In the conscious, storm-tossed parts of our minds and hearts are the intersections with experience and the perceptions of what we *think* is. What we think 'is' includes the mind in overdrive, the heart in turmoil, our identity in reconstruction mode, the demands of trying to live in control....

In our quiet times, whether we call it prayer, or meditation, or sitting in nature simply watching and waiting, we can let everything go, and be at peace.

Remember that talking about a thing changes nothing about the situations that we face in life. Sometimes talking can even get in the way.

Sometimes, the words are only an affirmation of the mind to provide connection with, or justification for, what is happening to us or around us.

Having said that, talking has its place. Talking things out provides an avenue for constructive reason-

ing and holds the possibility of finding workable solutions to the dilemmas that we each face in our lives. But talking is all about smoothing the surface waters isn't it? Talking and doing is all about keeping the boat afloat during the storm...all of which is an important set of activities....at the right time.

At our deepest levels, however, we need no words, we only need to see and feel and accept. In the deepest, quietest parts of our being is an assurance of sorts, a quiet confidence that knows it can survive in some form, no matter what occurs on the surface.

Possibly one of the most useful things I have learned recently has been to stop asking 'Why?'

How often do we ask: 'Why did this happen to me?' And how often do we follow-up with the words 'It's not fair!?' Once we stop asking 'Why' we begin to accept what happens in our lives and start to look for viable solutions or answers. Instead of whining and complaining, we begin to use the storms of life as tools for constructive change.

Storms of life do not change the person that you are at your deepest core. They do, however, create opportunities for new growth and new beginnings even though they may be very painful events. ☺

*When you set out on a journey and night covers the road,  
you don't conclude that the road has vanished*

*Author unknown*

## Strength and Learning

One of the hardest things about learning martial arts is to learn by giving way.

We are taught from childhood to stand up for ourselves, to be strong, to resist. We can learn quickly through fear and our relationships with other people to create barriers around our personality that protect us and defend us.

When we learn martial arts it is really no different: We resist force. We defend against being punched and kicked with hard blocks and rigid stances. We resist being thrown with stiffness and a rigid body. We throw with all our strength and if our partner is weaker or smaller we can succeed.

But this is not the road to learning. Jigoro Kano, the founder of Judo advocated a different path, and an altogether harder path. He advocated giving way. Note he said not giving in, or giving up, but giving way. When your opponents push, let them push, when they pull, let them pull. Add to their force and achieve an unbalancing effect with which you can throw or disarm an attacker. This is difficult, very difficult.

Later, when we get skilled at Judo or Karate, it is easy to rely on the techniques that we have learned and think of ourselves as skillful. It is much harder to focus upon the areas that still need work.

We have a training drill called randori, which literally means "chaotic practice." During randori, two players attempt to throw or pin each other within the confines of Judo rules. It's rather like sparring in Karate. Two players attempt to punch and kick each other, without getting hit. In randori and sparring, I like to leave myself open where I am weakest to see how people will attack me. In this way, I get to learn what it is

that I need to improve as a martial artist.

In some ways I am lucky. I am small and not very strong, which means that the only way for me to improve is to learn good technique. There will always be partners who are bigger and stronger than me and I'll never overcome sheer size and force in free practice unless I learn to use my partners' energies against them.

I consider that putting strength aside and learning to relax in the martial arts is one of the hardest skills to master. Putting aside rigidity in favor of movement is equally difficult. As I said at the beginning, we are taught from infancy to be strong and we apply it to all areas of our lives. Even in times of stress, we are told by those around us that we have strength and that we can overcome the stressful event, whatever its nature.

Don't get me wrong, strength is not a bad thing. Misapplied strength, however, can prevent us from acquiring some of the greatest lessons of life.

I cannot stress to you strongly enough (joke intended) that martial arts has taught me where and when to apply strength in my life. Oddly enough, being trained as a geologist and palaeontologist/ecologist has only reinforced my understanding of the applications of strength. Time overcomes everything...everything.

We are here to learn for a short span of time and if we resist what is offered to us, we deny the lessons that we could learn.

It is hard to put strength aside. It is hard to put aside a really good skill that you have learned. It is hard to set aside some of the rules about living that we think we were supposed to learn when we were children. The fact of the matter is that strength or

## SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

- ◆ **AKAYAMA SUMMER CAMP, NEW ORLEANS, LA, JULY 12-14TH, 2008.**

skill only works until something stronger or more skillful comes along, at which point we find ourselves wholly unprepared for the situation, because we have relied solely upon the strategy of applied strength or specific technical skill. Clearly when we meet something or someone who is stronger or more technically skillful than us, our learned strategies no longer apply. They are useless. If we have no understanding of realignment or movement we will be overcome.

In some ways it all comes back to knowing which battles to fight and which ones to walk away from, which battles to win and which ones to lose. A tactician thinks about the moment, a strategist thinks about the whole picture, the long term objectives.

Martial arts have tactical applications, but the road to success is in the role of the strategist. What do I need to give up now, to learn more, later? Where do I need to accept defeat now, to achieve victory later? Where do I need to give way now, in order to achieve mutual benefit and welfare for as many people as possible, later?

Difficult questions. How are you doing with the answers? ☺



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