

Pathways

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“Meaning is essential. If this moment truly matters to you, you will experience it fully”

—Deepak Chopra

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Connections

As we come to the end of the year, I have been giving some thought to what it is that I am really doing at the Starkville Martial Arts Academy.

It seems to me that we are all about building lives and making connections. We make connections within ourselves and between each other. We make connections between the mind and the body. We make connections between stress reduction and healthy living. We make connections between goals and intentions. We seek integration of the various parts of self.

Ultimately then, we are all about synergy, recognizing that the journey is one that is simultaneously both individual and communal. Together, as a group we achieve more than we would by virtue of our own individual efforts.

As I look back over the progress and goals sheets that our members have completed during the year (every time one of our students gets a new rank), I am struck by two things: Firstly, I am struck by the number of times that students mention the support and encouragement of their fellow students and the instructors. Secondly, I am struck by the number of times that students mention how our program has helped them reduce stress or overcome challenges in their lives.

So this is what it is all about; the martial arts are little more than a tool. What is of significance here, is how each of us uses the tool to construct something worthwhile for ourselves and for our community.

The road is not easy and it is not straight. Often times the rocks in our

path are ones that we put there, and eventually we come to the realization that only we can remove them if we wish to move forward in our journey.

So what is it in fact that I do here at the Academy? I am a facilitator of growth.

Things that grow out of this process include improved health, both internally and externally, mentally and physically. With improved health comes better mechanisms of stress management and an improvement in our relationships with self and others.

For sure there are physical skills in the martial arts that accrue as we move up the ranks, but I often think that these skills are an outward sign of inward development. When my students struggle internally, they often reflect the struggle externally in the way in which their martial arts skills are played out during class.

There is no getting away from it: What we do is all about connection. We are ripple makers. We cast stones of learning into our lives and the pebbles cause ripples in parts of our lives that we never imagined. Those same pebbles affect those around us and we create change in the lives of the people we touch. There is no avoiding it. So if we acknowledge that we affect those around us, it inevitably brings us to awareness. Each of us makes ripples in the lives of those around us, all the time, every day, everywhere. It is a question of becoming aware of what it is that we are doing. So we are all about positive change through synergetic connection. ☺

Tolerance

Continuing from where I just left off... How is it that synergetic connection works between people? My wife made a great comment the other day. We were traveling to England and discussing the heightened security all around us and my wife made the comment that society seems to have made the decision that people are the enemy. Wow! What a great comment.

So why is that? Where did the trust go? It seems to me that the more technically advanced we become, the more disconnected we become as individuals within society. The more people we have living on top of each other, the less time we have for each other. We insulate ourselves and ultimately, we end up isolating ourselves. We live hectic lives and don't have time for traffic or being put on hold. We are a society of instant gratification...I want what I want, when I want it, and if I don't get it, I am going to fuss, complain and whine until I get what I want, like a petulant child who has no understanding of the needs of others. In simple terms we are selfish and ego-centric.

The downside to such a strong sense of self is that we often have less tolerance and understanding of others or their needs. I suspect that much of it is unwitting and unintentional, but everything we repeat over and over becomes a deeply rooted habit.

So where does this leave us? I think it leaves us with a need to slow down and find time to re-connect with the people around us and with ourselves. At the risk

of sounding all New-Agey, we need to find time to stop and find some inner peace.

This is for me, where the martial arts came in. For me at least, and for many others that I know, martial arts classes represent an opportunity to get off the treadmill of life, slow down, and rejuvenate. In martial arts classes, it is possible to spot the stressed people right away. They have tight muscles, jerky movements and lack grace and elegance of action. They are intolerant of different ways to do things. During class we can put aside the stresses of the day and maybe at the end of class, we might find that the stresses do not need to be picked up again.

As I have said before, stress is an energy sapper. Stress sucks the life right out of us, literally and figuratively. I watch people age prematurely in high stress jobs, because they have not found ways to let the stress go. Consequently they have little energy left for the people around them. When stress enters our lives, tolerance goes right out of the window. And as the old saying goes, people in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.....well O.K.....I am taking a literary liberty here. We cast stones all about us with our emotions and they create ripples in the lives of those we touch. If we are too stressed to be tolerant of a little traffic, how is it that we expect to manage our families, friends, clients and fellow workers, to say nothing of the other six billion people on the planet?

We seem to be in such a rush all the time, we do not have time to be tolerant of our-

selves and therefore lack tolerance for others. We are in too much of a rush to check to see if we are really right, and often we are not. We force our way through our daily challenges with dogmatic positions rather than with true listening and a thirst for understanding.

We live in a world that is composed of opposites: Us and Them, which of course, has the very clear implication that *we* are right and *they* are wrong. It is my contention that more often than not, there is room for tolerance and understanding of different positions. So, needless to say this brings me back to our martial arts lessons. By studying my partner, I can discover new ways to move and develop new skills. By continuing to insist that my way of moving is the only way to win a sparring match, I am doomed to failure. Ultimately adaptation to our partners teaches us tolerance and opens the possibility of reaching higher levels of understanding. We can then translate the martial skills and use them as a metaphor for life. Watching and learning how others move through life, teaches me of the needs that exist outside of my own ego. If I understand those needs I can respond more appropriately towards them.

It takes more than a little tolerance and understanding to make synergy. It begins of course, within each of us. Start at home and move out from there. ☺

“Wise men, though all laws were abolished, would lead the same lives”

Aristophanes

The M word...

Continuing on from the end of the last article...How do you begin at home?

Form any years I have steered away from the "M" word because it has negative connotations in some corners of society...but I am going to use it... Meditation...there, I've said it.

Every major religion uses meditation, whether we use the word or not. Prayer is a form of mediation. Silent contemplation of the divine is a form of meditation. Learning to control your own biorhythms is a form of mediation.

So this is where I begin. If I want to let my stress go, then one of the simplest things to do is to sit and breathe. As we focus on breathing, naturally, calmly, rhythmically, the body calms itself and we alter the hormone balances of our bodies. When we are stressed we are filling our bodies with "fight or flight" hormones that depress our immune systems over time and keep us on edge. As we learn to sit and breathe, we help the body to release other hormones that have more beneficial effects on our health.

Well, guess what? This is where the martial arts classes come back in again. When we focus on the activities of class we are not focused on how stressful our day was. Moreover, when we are in class we are moving our bodies and generating a different set of hormones that give us the endorphin rush associated with feeling good. You might have heard about what some athletes call the "runners high"...it is the same thing. I call it

moving meditation. When we do martial arts we learn to breathe in new ways, we learn to move in new ways, we massage our internal organs, strengthen bone and muscle and modify the way in which the body works. Over time heart rate goes down, blood pressure drops and we become fitter, more balanced, supple, coordinated and flexible. It is Mother Nature at work! Some of the best moments in the martial arts occur when we cease to be consciously aware of what we are doing and the actions come to us, smoothly, without effort or conscious choice. These are moments of moving meditation. These are moments when we let go of our stress at its roots and walk away refreshed, calm, peaceful and a good deal happier in our outlook.

The immediate benefit is that we are more able to tolerate those around us who do not necessarily see the world in the same light as we do...for instance the five-year old boy who just knows that cutlery is an optional extra to eating meals at the dinner table! Or perhaps it is irate client who doesn't want to listen, or the employee who consistently chooses to disregard directives in favor of doing what he or she thinks they need to be doing, regardless of the job description. Any of these situations can stress us, but if we come to the situation with reserves of energy, we are much less likely to lose control and exacerbate the situation. Learning to control the internal environment is critical to creating har-

mony around you. Meditation, however, you define the term is a way of assisting the process.

I set aside time each day to do the M-thing. When I need to, I take time out of my day for a few minutes of contemplation and re-energizing. It is a part of every day. I find a place that is quiet, where I will not be disturbed. There are no phones, no radio's, TV's or other distractions. Sitting outside is good. Listening to nature is good. Sometimes, listening to quiet music can be helpful, especially late at night, when I want to induce a calm, deep, restful sleep.

Oddly enough, this is one of the places that being a geologist and being a martial artist intersect for me. I learned years ago as a geologist that being close to nature was one of the most therapeutic things that I could do. Likewise, I discovered that a really good martial arts work out achieves a similar, though palpably different sense of peace and calm. Better yet...practicing martial arts outside surrounded by the sights, smells and sounds of nature is truly exhilarating.

These are just my thoughts, it is your journey, find your own path, but wherever you start, there will be breathing. Be aware of your breath and work from there. Let the stress go, it's your choice. When you focus on your breath, you create a very powerful pathway for mind-body connections. The M word can help!

"I can affect change by transforming the only thing that I ever had control of in the first place, which is myself."

- Deepak Chopra

Holiday Shoppers

Did you ever notice that there are two types of Holiday Shoppers out there? There are customers who are short tempered, in a rush and intolerant. And there are calm, happy shoppers who seem to be unruffled by the near frenetic levels of haste, the constant and incessant barrage of advertising and the clamoring crowds around them. Some shoppers try to force their way through a herd of shoppers while others seem to glide along with ease.

Could there be a message here? Could it be that Holiday Shopping brings out the best and the worst in us? We can either look at Holiday Shopping as a chore or an adventure.

Could it be that holiday shopping simply brings out the sense of self with which we most easily identify?

So what are the implications?

When you're all stressed up with nowhere to go except waiting in line, nothing will be further from your mind than a sense of "holiday." When you are focussed on giving the best you can to those whom you love during the holiday season...there is a very real possibility that the intention will carry over beyond the "holidays."

When I was a kid in England, I worked my way through univesity in a supermarket and the holidays were always great. I used to love doing something extra for the shoppers and ease their path through the day. If I could find a cardboard box for their groceries without being asked to so, or find an extra item in the stockroom that was not on the shelves, I would. I used to get a real thrill out of seeing customers light up when they knew they had been just taken care of. The alternative was always to get irritable at unreasonable requests being made by a store full of harried customers all hell-bent on getting their shopping done as quickly as possible. Working in a supermarket taught me a lot, because after all, it's really not about holiday shopping is it?

It's really about how we face life. It's about the person we choose to show the world in times of stress. Winston Churchill made the comment that you can tell a person's charcter by the way in which he or she behves under stress. It is so true.

So how do you behave? What kind of holiday shopper are you? As Charles Dickens wrote all those years ago.... They were the best of times, they were the worst of times. Sometimes when we look back over times of stress we can say the same thing.

So look back over your life at times of stress and ask yourself this: What kind of holiday shopper are you? Is there an opportunity here for you to spread happiness and goodwill? Is there an opportunity here for you to learn a new way of behaving? Is there an opportunity to put a smile on a stressed person's face or change an outmoded habit?

What kind of holiday shopper are you? Do you make connections with those around you or do you send store clerks screaming for the hills thinking about their homicidal tendancies?

Holiday shopping is simply an amplifier of who we choose to be. So here we are, going full circle to my lead-off article. We either build connections in our lives by the ways in which we choose to behave or we sever connections and isolate ourselves from those aorund us. We either create opportunities for synergy or we stifle the opportunities and attempt to "go it alone".

Each moment is an opportunity to enjoy a "holiday" or create a "helliday"...and it's all up to you. You have the pebble, you cast it into the sea of your life, you create the ripples...as do we all.

Have a wonderful holiday season.

☺



December						
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25	26	27	28	29	30	31

January						
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8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

- ◆ Akayama Winter Camp, Mobile, AL, MLK weekend, January, 2006
- ◆ T'ai Chi Clinic, SMAA, January 28th, 2006
- ◆ Mississippi State Judo Championships, Jackson, MS, March 6th, 2006
- ◆ USA Judo National Championships, Houston, TX, April 20 - 22nd, 2006

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