

# On Teaching and Learning:

*Extract From Dragon Mind, The Psychological and Philosophical Attributes of Warriorhood, Originally publish June 1999*

*“Never let school interfere with your education.”*

**—Mark Twain—**

In nearly 25 years of study, I've encountered ignorance regarding Warriorhood from the mildest and most well-intended questions about the arts, to the most blatant insecurity and fear of training. I've had inquiries on one end of the spectrum and challenges on the other end. There are many faces to ignorance in the world. I didn't enjoy a lot of these realities, but they were mine to deal with nonetheless. So, as fellow Warriors, we hold a very clear option: Do we shirk this responsibility, squander our true power and miss this opportunity, however small, to educate another human and eliminate some small shred of ignorance from the world, or do we try, do we expose ourselves, do we endure misunderstanding and by teaching possibly change one view?

I've also seen the look on the face of an 8-year old girl as one of my female students flipped a larger male partner in class. It was the look of surprise and pride. It was the expression of pure joy, much like what I would imagine an explorer would wear upon finding an uncharted shore. I've seen the look on the face of the novice who first finds the “zone” of a certain movement and executes a successful technique without thinking. It's nothing less than enlightenment and wordless discovery. I've seen the faces of Warriors fresh from the “battle” of a rigorous workout, contented and unburdened of the artificial stresses of the outside world, void of ego. It's the honest look of our inner humanity and the experience that their eyes carry can never be taken away from them.

Teaching has allowed me to improve people's lives, whether by strengthening their confidence or by saving their life with the power to defend themselves. I've seen people reborn after losing 30 pounds and seen others quit smoking, drinking or drugs. Teaching can keep people out of prison, improve marriages and strengthen the spirit of a human until they become something formidable and dynamically beneficial to society and humanity as a whole. I've had the advantage of all of these experiences and so I have no doubt about the power of teaching. Some who read

this will not have had the benefit of these experiences and so they're entitled to have their doubts. The greatest piece of knowledge that there is to be had however is the simple truth that even though some of us have not yet felt this joy, we are all equally entitled to feel it. It was William James who wrote that there is no single thought quite as inspiring as the fact that **human beings can improve themselves**.

It is with this heart-felt belief that we are all ambassadors, role models and leaders that I say that every Warrior has the obligation to teach. As a teacher, both professionally trained and accidentally improved, that I offer the following advice on communicating passion and sharing learning.

- **Be genuine.** If you do nothing else, be who you are. Don't teach what you *think* you should teach; teach what you feel you should teach. **There is a student for every teacher on this planet** and if you fail to be honest with yourself, you fail and disappoint and abandon your student who is waiting. Teach honestly. Express the joy that training brings you.
- **Teach what you know.** Don't pretend to be something that you're not. Teach based on your experience and admit to your own shortcomings. No teacher knows all things and the mark of a master is the ability to admit what you do not know. Teach honesty by your own example.
- **Always seek the truth.** If you get stumped (and this should happen often), be honest about seeking out the truth. Research your craft and never stop learning. Make learning a habit for yourself and your students. Tell your students when you bring back the knowledge. They will not see you in a lesser light for having sought to improve yourself but will rather respect you for your continued efforts and be encouraged to do the same.
- **Never stop training.** Teaching is a facet of training, not an independent practice. Teacher's who stop doing cease to be Warriors. While you must at times lead a class and as such be unable to participate with the group, do all that you can with the class and do more than your students outside of the class. Buddha was once asked what made him different. Was he a man, a god?—what was his secret? His reply was that once he slept, but now he was awake. Be awake and mindful and conscious of every moment. Training is not an event—it's a process. **Absorb life and reflect truth.**

- **Don't seek students—just continue teaching.** If you remain true to your calling as a Warrior and lead first by example in your everyday life, you will awaken the call of the Warrior in those around you and they will join you without you having to ask them.
- **Teach slowly.** Don't confuse your desire to show, with the student's ability to absorb.
- **Plan your lessons.** Always have a concrete idea of what you will show. Have an objective and a logical sequence to guide your warm-up exercises and the evolution of your instruction. Your student(s) have come from busy lives and great distances to learn from you. Respect their time. Honour them with preparation.
- **Ask questions.** Gauge your students' interest and learning speeds by involving them through questioning.
- **Use a combination of theory, demonstration and step-by-step analysis.** Different people learn differently. In some cases, *rolling* with a student and allowing them to feel the give and take of a technique is the only way to teach. Others will need to understand things from a more scientific and biomechanical approach. Still others will require philosophical justification and orientation to function fully.
- **Correct errors sooner.** Remember that practice does not make perfect—only perfect practice makes perfect. Make sure your students are doing things correctly before they can create bad habits.
- **Remain flexible.** Noam Chomsky said that education is little more than a system of imposed ignorance. Once you label something, define it, give it clear-cut criteria, you also risk limiting it and making it stagnant. Take the example of Bruce Lee's *Jeet Kune Do*. Although this system was originally conceived as an eclectic art that sought "*no way as way*", following Lee's death, many of his students began to squabble over the shreds of Bruce's lineage. His system became fixed. Some preserved it in his memory, defying his strictest wishes. Others did little to evolve beyond his innovations. His true disciples did not adhere to the style name simply for the sake of marketing,

but rather continued to evolve in their own manner, in the same spirit in which they had been taught.

Ultimately, every style has its limitations and its strengths. Understand this. There is no one true way. Granted, some styles will contain more errors, seem more wrong to you than others, but even then, don't assume that such a system is void of value. While it may not be a priority for you to learn it, don't degrade it. Keep your mind open and even the most unlikely style will be a source of learning for you.

What's most important is that you consciously and continually seek to reduce and remove the need for measurement in learning. **The need to measure begets a need to compete and competition destroys quality learning.** This destructive cycle begins with how you pace yourself. Regardless of what your specific ability is, one of the functions of learning from a teacher or training with a group is that you learn to adjust and compromise. If you're able to do a hundred push-ups easily but find yourself in a class warm-up where students are only doing ten, modify your approach and train in such a way that you are able to find challenge in the pace and quantity of the class drill. If ten push-ups provide no challenge in their conventional form, change your hand positioning, go lower, slower, defer more weight onto one hand, or add dynamic tension to the mix. The reason for this compromise is that **Warriorhood is made stronger by the presence of a tribe.** There is a powerful advantage that comes from belonging and sharing. Moreover, every exercise has the opportunity to both inflate your ego and distance you from that group, or else to increase your bond to them. The Warrior's power comes from a connectedness to humanity, not from a divorce from unity.

Similarly, if you're sparring with a 5-foot, 90 pound, 12-year old, but are capable of delivering a kick that can knock a 300-pound punching bag to the ceiling, the same adjustment is expected. Reduce your power. **There's nothing to be gained from dominating your partner** and depriving them of the opportunity to explore and learn. Obviously, if you were in this circumstance, this would not be the time to practice power. Instead, work your speed, accuracy and control. Practice your footwork, or spar on your weak side. **A confident martialist does not need to manifest the internal reality of his ability.** A student who is unable to find challenge in the pace of the class, will become unable to spar with less experienced or smaller students. Other partners will become too tense or too loose, too quick or too slow—eventually that student will be surrounded by excuses rather than opportunities to improve. By comparison, the student who has discovered the value

of pacing themselves will have the discipline, patience and self-control to not only *absorb* the imbalances of their partner, but also the clarity to instruct the other and improve them. Remember, you train with a *partner*, not an *opponent*. You're not trying to prove anything or to defeat them. You should instead be trying to defeat your own personal weaknesses.

Motivational expert Alfie Kohn has written extensively on the destructive effects of incentives and the attitude of competition in the workplace. His attitude is surprisingly holistic for the business world. Kohn has said most succinctly, "*Whenever you have a stick and a carrot, you always have a jackass in between*". If you're a teacher, be aware of what type of motivation you're using in your class. Avoid the outdated bribes of Behaviourism and appeal to the humanistic, higher order values of the individual. The Taoist philosopher Lao Tzu once wrote:

*"The archer who shoots for a prize of bronze is distracted.  
The archer who shoots with the flicker of gold in his eye is blind.  
The archer who shoots for the attempt has all of his skill."*

**Once you've begun to address the poisonous effects of competition in your training, continue to erode the need for measurement in your own self.** When training on your own at home, eliminate the need to count repetitions entirely. Who cares if you're ordinarily able to do 30 bicep curls with 35 pounds? Maybe you're tired today, torn, strained or less energetic. Perhaps you're *better* rested, nourished and psyched to exceed this arbitrary limit. One day's accomplishment has no bearing on the present experience of your conditioning. Listen to your body. How can you expect to cultivate a self-defence method that is responsive and versatile if you're training your body in a way that is rigid and archaic? Be mindful of every action and work out knowing that with every conscious and correct movement, you are improving. Do not become detained by thoughts of comparison.

**In class, avoid preoccupation with the notion of rank.** A novice can be technically superior to a veteran. Natural athleticism and drive are present in some and not in others. Every student's journey is their own. It's the teacher's responsibility to gauge comparable levels of achievement and not to insist that every student comply with the mould of the instructor's nature. Moreover, do not obsess over your own level. **Learn every day and improve.** If you train in a system that employs ranks, don't equate the colour of your belt with your self-worth. I've seen dozens of friends in other arts achieve a black belt only to quit the following year.

This failing stems from the belief that they have somehow arrived. To reiterate an earlier point, the only reason to strive to reach a mountain's summit is to better see the range of summits that remain to be climbed. To use Buddhist language, the material world is impermanent and attachment to anything impermanent will lead to pain and loss. You can't stop a river from flowing without making the water stagnant and killing its *"riveness"*.

I often tell my students that I have trained for more than 20 years in the traditional martial arts and that despite this I've somehow still managed to learn something about the nature of combat. **Learning does not come from the system—it comes from the student.** Style is simply a guide, a map that ideally leads the individual on a journey inwards. Do not become a slave to set patterns. The way of the Warrior lies outside of conformity.

The role of the teacher is to aid the student in this personal journey. **A teacher should not impose, but rather awaken.** All Warriors are intrinsically teachers. As Nietzsche said:

*"A student who remains a student, repays his teacher poorly."*

This is precisely the point of learning: **one should ultimately share what has been gained to improve the collective.** This being said, I can attach no more specificity to the art of teaching. Share honestly and you will receive in return more than you have given. Provide your understanding with full conviction, with all of your energy and **without fear of exhausting your depth of knowledge** and you will be compensated in ways that cannot easily be detailed.