

The Psychological Cost of Harm:

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“Therefore, when warriors go out successfully and come back unhurt, they understand the art of war.”

—Sun Bin—

The modern warrior is faced with the difficulty of experiencing violence at its most intimate and difficult range. As such, it's only natural that as a student of self-defense, you would crave the most effective methods of surviving available. It seems better to survive now and deal with the ramifications later, but what if this is not an “either/or” situation as many marketers would have you believe? What if it is possible to have the most effective survival techniques and strategies without having to sacrifice your psychological self and future mental health? Wouldn't that be the ideal solution?

There is more to surviving a street fight than simply getting out of the immediate physical danger. You also have to be able to function normally after the fact otherwise what was the point of defending yourself to begin with? Popular consciousness would have us believe that violence and specifically the act of harming, is somehow glamorous. We are inundated with this message in the entertainment that we absorb every day of our lives. It brings to mind a quote from writer Oscar Wilde:

“As long as war is regarded as wicked, it will always have its fascination. When it is looked upon as vulgar, it will cease to be popular.”

I can remember the sight of war veterans cringing at the sound of a 21-gun salute at a Memorial Day celebration. I can still see the face of a holocaust victim I once met describing the pain he had endured in a concentration camp. I have a number of friends who have seen active duty overseas in Bosnia and Kosovo and I've seen the change in them after serving in the theatre of war. This is the true face of violence and each time we allow ourselves to glamorize the act of hurting another human—even when it is a justified act of self-defence—we only succeed in distancing ourselves further from our own humanity.

To avoid becoming debilitated by the violence, we must begin by forgetting the bloodless movie fistfights, the hyperbole of pro-wrestling, even the censorship of the evening news. A Warrior must accept the existence of the darker side of your violence and guard against it. If we allow the pendulum of our sensitivity to swing to the opposite extreme, we see that a failure to respond to aggression can be equally debilitating. Many senior black belts in other styles have trained with me, after being involved in a real street altercation. Despite years of training high kicks and complex blocks in their traditional systems, they were emotionally and spiritually devastated to find that a football tackle or schoolyard headlock was completely overwhelming. Many who have trained in non-contact environments are awestruck when they find themselves at the mercy of brutally simple clubbing fist. Unfortunately, the trauma of having one's bubble popped doesn't always lead to revelation. For many, it is cause for discouragement, true depression or even abandonment of their pursuits all together.

This is not the answer. In fact, this is the furthest thing from the answer. Quitting simply cements the subconscious belief that training cannot help your chance of survival. As one of my Kempo Sensei's said, training and the growth of awareness *is* life. **You don't quit life.** By this he was manifesting his most profound understanding that martial studies, like all pursuits, are tightly interrelated to the essence of being. You do not "*make time*" to train—if you possess the correct mindset, you are always training. Once you are awakened to the reality of self-defence as an ongoing life skill, training becomes a process and awareness that touches every aspect of your function. You walk like a warrior, eat like a warrior, even laugh like a warrior. You remain a warrior by living as one.

I can remember a young man who once joined my school. He had decided to join with a group of three of his friends. By far the most physically imposing of the group at well over 6 feet tall and well muscled, I expected him to be the toughest, but as training had proven so many times before, size rarely predicts ability. A low threshold for pain, a crippled self-esteem and poor endurance seemed to embarrass him in his first class despite my support and I discussed this with him at length after class. I encouraged him to recognize his natural abilities and identified many of his attributes that we would develop together in short order. I also discussed how these same advantages presented exceptional challenges to him. Even then, I could feel that I had failed to fully convince him, but I looked forward to having another crack at him during the next class. That opportunity never came.

Two nights later, he was involved in a knife fight at a club. While intervening to help a friend, he was slashed deeply behind the ear. The cut, although severe,

miraculously missed his artery and spine. The end result however was that he was so frightened and demoralized that he decided there was nothing that anyone could have done in his situation. Training in self-defence became instantly pointless and he resolved never to return to class. To this day, my inability to convince him to continue training to guide him through the resolution of his fear remains a great failing of my early years as a young instructor, however it gave me the drive to dig deeper into the psychology of fear and its role in martial training.

Grossman divides violence into 5 distinct stages:

- 1 – Harming
- 2 – Exhilaration
- 3 – Remorse
- 4 – Rationalization
- 5 – Acceptance

The act of harming is a technical issue. Although we will discuss some key elements of combat mechanics later in this manual, the ultimate “*How*” of your training will always remain far less important than the “*Why*”.

Exhilaration is a natural response. When you harm another human, you will feel a rush. Expect it. Accept it. **Exhilaration is both the anaesthetic that staves off remorse and the trigger that brings it on.** By understanding that exhilaration is normal in controlled doses, you have taken your first step towards avoiding fixation with the adrenal rush of hurting and begun to resolve the debilitating potential of remorse.

Resolution of *Remorse* comes from the active analysis of your responses. Ask yourself: why you have acted the way that you have? Even in your visualization, you should foresee the by-product of guilt following any response (even when justified) and see yourself successfully resolving it. **Remorse is the result of emotions overriding your logical ruling power.** This is precisely what you train for. Your intelligence must help to guide your emotions.

Rationalization and a basic understanding of your natural responses to harming another human will lead you to Acceptance. If you don't cultivate your rational faculties, you're at risk of over-indulging in the Remorse stage. This can create a hyper-sensitivity to the act of harming, making you impotent in the future.

Each of these stages has their specific dangers. Grossman states that for some, the exhilaration and the chemicals produced by it in the body can become addictions as real as any drug. Historically, the most powerful therapy for trauma stemming from war has been and still remains the **recognition and acceptance** by the public or the soldier's community. Awards, memorials and parades are all examples of this time of reinforcement. These vital components help provide the veteran with closure. The Vietnam War is an excellent example of the danger of fighting an unpopular war. Soldiers were condemned for their participation and deprived of any sense of honour. As a result, rates of post-traumatic stress disorders skyrocketed to unprecedented levels.

The martial artist is not privy to these forms of closure. **An act of urban rage holds little public importance**, at best earning a quick mention on the evening news in a small city and total neglect in a large one. For the individual involved however, the attack carries the same traumatic potential as a wartime combat experience would for a soldier. Each of us may be called upon to use lethal force to protect ourselves or our loved ones at some point in our lives. If effect, we are all *Ronin*—masterless samurai, trained in a spirit similar to those noble warriors that came before us. We seek to preserve similar values and honour codes without the advantage of submitting our decisions to the responsibility of a shogun or lord. We are alone with our honour codes and we must have the psychological tools to mentally and emotionally survive the act of harming. **Only by pre-evaluating all of your limits, can you remain confident that you will act responsibly and effectively during a hostile encounter.**

Obedying your own pre-established principles, your ruling power, your *warrior's code*, will help to defer responsibility from your emotions to your logical faculties. Be careful here not to confuse subjugation with self-deception or irresponsibility. I'm not talking about lying to yourself. An honour code is quite the opposite. A warrior never "*just takes orders*". They are always acting according to their own values and beliefs. **They are the masters of their own fate.**

An excellent example of just how easy it can be to fool your brain in a combat scenario can be found in the military practice of loading one rifle in a firing squad with a blank cartridge during executions. In this way, the gunmen can each console themselves with the thought that perhaps their own gun was unloaded. Historically, this has been used to curb public backlash in the event that the victim of the execution was popular, much like hooding an executioner in earlier centuries. Since it was impossible to be sure which gunman was "innocent" it was impossible to allocate blame.

This simple, seemingly absurd trick was intended to lessen the guilt the soldiers would feel. It is easy to dismiss this idea. I'll be the first to admit it does seem ridiculous. After all, how can you expect a soldier who is well versed in the use of a gun, to not know if they had in fact hit their mark? A sniper knows when they've hit their mark in a military context even when an entire war is raging on around them. In fact, this is precisely my point. Even an excuse that is this transparent and cosmetic is enough to allow the men to fire with less regret. Even though the men in the firing squad will know with some degree of certainty whether or not they are in fact innocent or guilty, it is the social face-saver, and the public excuse that helps them manage their grief. They are allowed to be innocent. While this is an extremely simplified version of subjugation to a chain of command, it still illustrates just how easily our brains. I make this point not to support this method. The blank in the firing squad is not an authentic form of detachment. It's a short-term behaviourist trick that may get the job done on the firing line, but that does so only at the soldiers' expense. The blank does little to avoid the post-traumatic stress the shooter may experience.

The only responsible form of detachment for the warrior is the preparation of the ruling power and a clearly defined code of conduct. This is a time-tested and essential element of every warrior tradition in the world. In her book [The Code of The Warrior](#), Shannon E. French, assistant professor of philosophy at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis notes that it is the duty of the warrior to: *“employ mental discipline to remind ourselves how we felt before the world conspired to alter our perspective.”* She notes that we must make ourselves immune to the influence of evil, seeing it as both commonplace and impermanent.

*“The soul should use times of security to prepare itself
for harsh circumstances.”*

—Seneca—