

MARTIAL ARTS TRAINING AS SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

by Matthew Lowes

When we get involved with martial arts, or any activity, we are already starting with a lot of assumptions, ideas, and even fantasies about who we think we are, what we're doing, and why. Nevertheless we are setting out upon a journey.

However, although we may think we know who we are and where we're headed, we don't. We really don't know. But if we continue on this journey with a sincere intent to understand something *beyond* what we think or believe, then, and only then, our practice can take us someplace we never imagined.

The journey progresses with an inquiry into everything, a questioning that extends to every aspect of ourselves, our experience, and the world around us. And within that lies the discovery of our own fear, our aggression, our selfishness, our desires, our anger, our arrogance, our ambitions, and our pain.

Soon, what may have started out as a way to acquire a skill, to attain knowledge, or to better ourselves, becomes more a matter of just dealing with ourselves. And we struggle to let go of our fear, our aggression, our selfishness, our desires, and so on.

But even that is not enough.

Ultimately, this journey requires letting go of everything all at once, including ourselves. It requires not only an unreserved acceptance of one's life, but also of one's death – not as a future event, but as a present reality, that is always here and now. It requires complete and total surrender.

This is the path to enlightenment, and it ends with a realization that lies beyond all limitations, beyond all thoughts, and beyond all concepts.

Wherever you are on this journey, and whatever you may think of all that, what we're talking about is not a matter of self-improvement, nor of strengthening any

personal spirit. Unfortunately for our egos, it's more a matter of letting go of this person, and of recognizing the undifferentiated spirit that is everything and everyone.

To train like this is not to engage in so-called “spiritual” martial arts, as if it were somehow an upgraded or more moral version of regular martial arts. That is the wrong way of looking at things. Instead, it is to engage in martial arts training *as* a spiritual practice, with the intention of inquiring into the truth, of understanding yourself, of seeing clearly, and of letting go of the unreal, the untrue, and all selfish attachments and desires.

Ultimately, martial arts as a spiritual practice is not about peaceful people learning how to cope with violence. It's about violent people – people who are already in conflict with themselves – learning how to cope with peace.

Our present window into this endeavor is mind body awareness.

Mind body awareness can be thought of as more than just a study of the mind and body, or even of their coordination. It is also a study of awareness itself. And it is a study of these things on the most fundamental level. It is to ask: What is it that I am experiencing? What is this mind? What is this body? What is this awareness? And who is it that is aware?

You probably already have some assumptions, some ideas, and some beliefs about these things. So my advice for training is this: Whatever you happen to think or believe about the mind, the body, and awareness ... as much as possible, forget about it, at least temporarily. Let yourself be unsettled by these questions. And in each moment of our practice, just try to see what is happening. Look at all this as a kind of experiment. Observe carefully, without judgment, and without leaving anything out, whatever it is that you are experiencing.

If we do this, we can't go wrong.