

It Doesn't Matter

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Published in *Qi Journal* Spring 2008



Above us, silver stars pierced a black sky as my friend Stephanie and I drove U.S. 101 north from San Francisco to Ukiah. She was telling me about her ten-year-long training in the Japanese martial art of Naginata. Competitors (mostly women throughout its history) wield a wooden spear with a blade attached. Altogether the weapon is about seven feet long. The basic uniform is a white tunic and long-skirted black hakama. Elaborate protective gear makes the combatants look like medieval warriors. A stiff, heavy helmet fashioned of quilted indigo-colored cotton has sides that extend outward and flip upward to guard the neck as well as the head. An attached metal grate sits in front of the face. The breastplate is solid bamboo coated with black lacquer. The ensemble also includes an apron made of overlapping panels of quilted cotton, bamboo-slatted shin guards, and gauntlets that reach above the wrists. Naginata is a refined and formal art with measured, graceful movements—until a participant lunges forward, lets loose with a ferocious kiai, and does her best to bash her opponent on the head.

When Stephanie first took up this art, she wasn't used to getting hit. The pain, frustration, and humiliation would stop her. They shattered her concentration and short-circuited her ability to respond. But about a year and a half into her training, during one vivid sparring session, she realized the blows were no longer having their usual effect. It wasn't that they didn't hurt—she had no need to deny that fact—but she was able to hold her focus and keep fighting. Stephanie looked across the car seat at me and said her epiphany that night was, “I'll always get hit, and it will always hurt, *but it doesn't matter.*”

I loved hearing those words. I glommed onto them because they said precisely what I'd been thinking about my life. And I do think that life is a martial art—it requires all the qualities cultivated by diligent training: awareness, quick reflexes, balance, well-honed technique, persistence, compassion, integrity, and a sense of humor.

People who take up a martial art knowingly expose themselves to risk. As an outspoken (and outwritten) person, I'm frequently exposed. I sometimes get appreciative strokes, but I also draw plenty of hits. The hits and the pain that goes with them no longer *surprise* me. That's a big one. It means I waste a lot less time and energy reacting to the *fact* of the hit or grumbling about how undeserved and unfair it may be. Some years ago I stopped feeling sorry for myself and it freed up an enormous chunk of life force that I use for better purposes. The image of a bird flying the coop: When I grasped that getting hit is intrinsic to being alive, I felt like an escapee.

It's not that the injury isn't there; it's not that the healing process doesn't take time—I'm human, which means I'm woundable and I require time to repair. But the initial hit doesn't stop me and the healing takes less time than it used to and doesn't command anywhere near my full attention. If anger and belief in my own rightness are mingled with the hurt, I can even *gain* energy from the episode and that extra fuel stokes constructive thinking and work.

No matter how “enlightened” or evolved I become, I will still be human and vulnerable. I do not want to detach from my emotions or my body. Their experiences are what teach me and shape me. Even if I understand who hit me and why they hit me (their mothers didn't love them; they're envious; I hit them first; etc.), that doesn't change the fact that I got hit and have to register the pain and go through a recovery period. I can and do gain objectivity and inner strength as I mature. I learn not to take everything personally, but just being reminded that people have a need to exorcise internal demons by lashing out at others makes me see my environment as less benign and less safe. The damage is minimized but not neutralized. This sensitivity, this vulnerability (that springs from my attachment) is part of being a complete person. In fact, attachment is the source of my sustenance and keeps providing me with opportunities to learn and

expand. Until I'm ninety years old and have made the decision to depart this life, detachment is just a wishful-thinking word for denial.

Denial of the initial hurt or of the recovery process and the time that it takes is dangerous. It leads me away from my authentic self. It thwarts healing. Wounds that are not acknowledged—that are suppressed—fester and infect my entire being, distorting both my inner and outer worlds. The act of recognition is the first and most crucial step toward healing. It opens the door for the whole procedure to move along faster and more thoroughly. Listening to my reactions and emotions lets them relax and disperse. They are *noticed* and sometimes that's all they really need.

When I get quiet (usually during daily T'ai Chi and meditation), my inner self leaps forward and grabs the mike. I don't always like what she has to say because I wish I were *above* being hurt—too evolved, too aware, too sure-footed. But that will never happen. And, really, I know better than to want it to.

Like most physical illnesses, most psychic hurts are self-healing over time. I have found myself, ironically, watching with detachment as I make my way day by day (or week by week or month by month depending on the depth of the wound) back to being whole. It reminds me of a black eye—the pressure of the blood under the surface is released and the bruise spreads out, changing gradually from blue-black to yellow-gray and finally vanishing into the healthy skin color. I can speed up the process, but I can't sidestep it.

The more I put myself out there, the more risk I incur and the more hits I sustain. (Simply following my intuition day by day and becoming who I am instead of soullessly conforming is enough to do the trick.) Despite the fact that I have many resources such as T'ai Chi, meditation, journaling, running, swimming, friends, and—most importantly—the natural world, life will kill me in the end, partly with the accumulated effect of all the blows absorbed and the energy expended in recovering from them. I accept that. But I've made it to the age of fifty-eight and I know I'll continue putting myself out there for the remainder of my life. I'll get hit. It will hurt. But it doesn't matter.