

The Empty Handed Master.

Giving up – getting all.

"Perform every act of your life as if it's your last," the chief instructor said with flashing eyes and dramatic presence. "In martial arts training, give up your 'self'.

"Look at this bamboo branch," he continued. "See how it bends lower and lower under the weight of the snow? There is a point when the snow will fall from the branch, and the bowed branch will spring back into place. When you practice your martial arts form, move like the falling snow ... naturally. And like the bamboo plant, allow yourself to respond spontaneously. If you do this, your movements will not be weighted down by the effort of will power - the effort that says, 'I will be stronger, more powerful, faster!'"

The students were standing in the snow on a bright early winter day, the sun warm on their skins, the air windless. Majestically, the snow surrounded them as they listened intently to their teacher.

"If you try to do this, you will fail. If you have thoughts of winning, you will surely lose. But there is something you can do. Give your total self to every act, as if it is your last!"

A Great Stillness

An assistant instructor lined the students up in a plowed practice area. Over and over they repeated their basic moves, keeping the cold of the morning at bay by the intensity of the exercises. Then they began the well-worn forms, a combination of techniques that they had practiced many times before. As they continued their movements, they became aware of a new sensation.

"Faster, harder, more. Give of yourself," the assistants were shouting, encouraging their students. "Let each movement be the first and final one!"

"Now stop," they commanded. "Prepare yourself for one set of techniques that you can give yourself to, utterly and completely. Are you ready?"

"Yes, sir!" they shouted back in unison.

"Now begin!"

The instructor counted out the cadence of moves, encouraging each student to an even greater commitment.

The sensation they were feeling became more intense. It was as if they had fallen through a hole in time. In fact, it felt like there was no time - only a great stillness, even though they were moving. After they had completed their forms, they realized that time had stopped.

They had been practicing for more than an hour even though it seemed like only a few minutes! They had forgotten about the world and everything around them during that intense time they were concentrating on their forms. They had felt as if they were part of the snow, the earth, trees, mountains and the lake. Each movement did not feel as if it were leading to another, but rather that it was unique and complete unto itself, yet part of everything else. They went beyond themselves, letting go without effort, without wanting or intending to do so. They were flying free.

The Razors edge.

"Students, you are training as if you are dancing alone, striking at ghosts in the air!" the teacher said. "This is not real karate. You need to feel the challenge of attack to be empty, still and alert. This alertness, this stillness of attention, is the main reason for learning this art. Without it, you would be walking as if in a dream. From now on, until we say it is enough, you will be under attack. When you least expect it, we will be there to hit you with our bamboo swords. Do you understand?" "Yes, sir," the students replied.

A Sharp Whack

The students went about their daily practice and chores, nervously readying themselves for the attack from their instructors. Morning came and went. The afternoon gave way to twilight, but still nothing had happened.

"Was it just a joke?" one student asked at dinner.

"Maybe they were just trying to frighten us," another student suggested.

As the two students were washing their dishes after dinner, they suddenly sensed a presence behind them. It was too late to turn! They felt a sharp whack on their shoulders. Before they could recover, the door closed behind them, leaving the room empty. The students were stunned but not hurt.

Ouch! Yeow!

As the students lay in bed that night, they heard a creaking sound. Then suddenly, in the dark, there were shouts.

"Ouch!" "Yeow!" "Ouch!"

Someone turned on the lights. Six students moved around the sleeping area rubbing their backsides. They all looked around for the culprits, but no one could be found. The only sign of an intruder was the swaying door.

Tea and Cookies

The attacks went on night after night, but the students couldn't stop them. After a week, the students decided they had endured enough. They agreed to pretend to be asleep that night so they would be prepared for their attackers. Just after midnight, they heard the creaking sound of someone walking across the wooden floor.

"KIAI!" they shouted as they jumped up. One of the students immediately turned on the lights.

"Good evening, students," the teachers said. "We thought you would like some tea and cookies after your long and weary battles," said one of the teachers, carrying a tray of cookies and a large pot of tea.

They all had a good laugh, sat down together and enjoyed their late-night snack.

Someone is Behind You

The attacks continued over the next few days and nights, but now the students met the attackers (their teachers) with proper blocks to fend off the bamboo swords. They became so good at this that they could defend against any attack.

"Now students, you are living the 'empty self.' You have awakened from your dream state and you are living on the razor's edge of attention. But I must warn you," said the teacher cautiously, "Watch out! There is someone behind you!"