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## ON SELF DEFENCE, ON STAYING ALIVE

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Being alive is dangerous. Being alive is active. Whether we are aware of it or not our bodies and ourselves are continuously engaged in a balancing act. Life can only exist in a very narrow range of conditions. Exactly what these conditions may be will differ for all of us. Since we are all unique, what is needful for each of us varies. As organisms we need particular physical conditions of temperature, pressure and oxygen levels. As animals we need particular dietary requirements from our food. As primates we need social interactions. And as individuals, human beings, we need to express ourselves in our own ways so that we can discover our Selves for ourselves.

There is a concept in biology called homeostasis, which literally means "stable equilibrium". It refers to the tendency of all living things to preserve themselves, as themselves, amidst changing conditions. The word stable might encourage us to think of homeostasis as maintaining life in a static condition. What is held stable is the equilibrium. An individual can change quite a lot to preserve its equilibrium, its existence. Homeostasis is not a static "stable equilibrium", it is a dynamic "stable equilibrium".

So what has all this got to do with self defence? First I want to stress the activity and assertiveness of living things. Organisms act. They "do things" to maintain their homeostasis. If environmental conditions threaten an organism's well being, it will act to restore its equilibrium. Life is assertive to preserve itself. Life is not passive in the negative sense of that word. Neither is life aggressive as some people might assert. Life is; and does what is necessary to continue to be. The second point I want to stress is homeostasis itself, the dynamic stable equilibrium. The maintenance of a stable core in the face of shifting conditions. This idea of balance or harmony is not just restricted to biology, it has relevance in many spheres, not least in self defence.

There is a sense in which just being alive is a continuous process of self defence. It is not just when a mugger attacks us, or when we are picked out for our appearance, beliefs or behaviour. Being alive means a continuous balancing act of self maintenance. And, it is not defensive, except in the sense of doing what is necessary to restore optimal conditions. Being defensive in this way is not the passive

defensiveness of being hidden in some closet, citadel, or safe place. There are no safe places. The self defence of living organisms is the active, assertive celebration of being alive.

OK. Fine. Sounds wonderful. But what good does all this wordage do the next time someone decides to take exception to the way I dress or move, or talk? The answer is that if it remains just wordage for you, it won't do you any good at all. The words must be translated into reality. The way we translate ideas, words, into reality is through our bodies. To make self defence real we have to practice making our ideas real in our bodies. We have to go to classes.

If you look through a typical evening class, community centre, or sports centre programme you will find plenty of self defence or martial arts classes and courses. There are even programmes on the television! But, what are all these various classes teaching? Some of them will claim to teach techniques;

What to do if someone puts his hand on your knee.

What to do if someone grabs your wrist.

..... and so on.

Some of them are very hard and aggressive, training your muscles and teaching you smash down your opponents. Some of them, currently in the minority, are softer and more integrated, encouraging the emergence of the natural self-

defensiveness of homeostasis at the level of person - person conflict.

I confess my prejudice towards the last type of approach. I have several reasons for this. Firstly the technique orientated class may obscure a very important issue. That of the 'victim' mentality. Many of us are wounded by our culture and our upbringing and carry at the core of our being an idea or belief of not being "good enough" or not being "right" or generally not deserving to be the way that we are. This is often picked up by people around us and we are seen as victims. That is we are people who are safe to attack because we are unlikely to respond assertively. Kaleghl Quinn in her excellent C4 series "Stand Your Ground" devoted a great deal of time to this issue, particularly as it affects women. But women are not alone as sufferers of this cultural wounding. All of us who may be outside the cultural norm, gays, blacks, OAPs, asians, punks, the unemployed, the list goes on . . . , have times when we feel somehow "wrong" or "bad" or "not good enough". We become our own oppressors, acquire the victim mentality of fear and invite attack, however unconsciously.

The hard aggressive styles tackles this issue by vigorous physical training and bodily development. They stress speed, power and technique. But this is external development and may not be matched by any internal change. Inside a powerfully developed shell the core self may be still

unaffected, or may just acquire an overlay of bluster and aggression. The surface development itself may be more trouble than it is worth. It may attract people who need to attack you to bolster their own self image. Or, you may unconsciously be projecting a challenging aggressive macho image which invites attack. In addition physical development can only be taken so far. We all age and with age comes an increasing likelihood of training injury, if the training is hard on the body. What is the point of a self defence system or programme of training that itself may damage the body?

Furthermore the technique oriented approaches are too mechanical and rigid.

- The attacker grabs you from the front by your left wrist.
- You pivot to the right and strike with your elbow to their armpit.

But, what do you do in the street if the attackers don't do what they are supposed to do? Or what do you do in a confined space?

The third approach, which has traditionally been called "internal" to distinguish it from the physically, muscular, "external" styles, may at first seem slow and unrewarding. It may seem "soft" or "feminine" or even "camp" in the body movements it uses. But in the long term it rewards the serious student with greater benefits than simply being able to deal with unprovoked aggression.

One of the internal styles, Tai Ch'i Chuan, which is an extremely powerful and effective self defence system contrary to many popular misconceptions in the west, has one proverb about the long term rewards of practice.

- The flexibility of a child.
- The constitution of a lumber-jack.
- The tranquillity of a sage.

and another about the reasons for practice.

- The prolongation of life.
- The rejuvenation of mind and body.
- The prevention of senility.

The internal styles are body techniques to enhance harmony in the individuals. They encourage and assist the natural processes of homeostasis.

They are not interested simply in self defence in the limited sense of what to do if you are attacked. They are self defence in the sense of being life enhancing. As I said before; the self defence of living is the active, 'assertive celebration of being.

The three internal styles with which I am familiar, Tai Ch'i Chuan, Pa Kua Chang, and Hsing I Chuan, differ to the inexperienced eye in their external forms. But, they are all the same in terms of their principles. Each has a repertoire of movements which are practised endlessly until they are correct. But, what correct may be in terms

of the students' own development. The teacher shows the postures and explains the principles and it is up to the student to discover the principles and their physical expression in her or his own body. The forms are set yet there is freedom within the form, because the form must become uniquely yours for it to be effective. Effective, in terms of its health enhancing effects, and incidentally in terms of its self defence application.

Since the postures are measured internally by the student, testing is a necessary exercise to connect the internal feel and the external effect, and avoid self delusion. By regular practice and testing, the student discovers improvements and self worth. The tests are non competitive; each student cooperates with the others in a process of testing and being tested. This leads to a more positive self evaluation and reduction of the victim mentality. You feel good in your body. You feel good about your body and your self.

The internal styles are also extremely effective in their capacity to deal with aggression. However, since each posture demonstrates principles, the postures must be understood before they can be used effectively. This understanding is a continuous process of discovery and a single posture may give rise to a number of applications. The mechanism of technique oriented styles is avoided

and the potential problem of being required to react in situations different from the set pieces of the training hall fades.

The internal approach is from the inside out rather than the 'outside-in' training of the external styles. This may be very challenging to the western student. Strength in the internal comes from posture not from muscle. The mind learns to relax and be calm, not aggressive or agitated. There is a beauty in the performance of the internal, both in the sequence of the postures and in the aesthetics of some of the poses adopted. This different approach to strength disturbs many westerners who associate strength with machismo and muscle, not with posture and grace.

Karate friends of mine admit the effectiveness of the internal. But one confessed to me that one reason why he could not contemplate following the internal was the "campness" of some of the postures. I celebrate this "campness" and revel in it. I know I can be strong and soft. I can defend myself without the self injury of adopting a false and hollow macho masculinity. I can practise and enjoy my body, feeling my body moving gracefully yet powerfully. I can begin to break out of my 'safe' and guarded self defensiveness and return to the natural self defence of organic homeostasis:

The active and assertive celebration of being.