



WESTERN MARTIAL ARTS

MARTIAL ARTS AND THE RAVAGES OF TIME

Hitting the Ground
Mike Panian, 25 Jul 2016

I am in free fall
arms akimbo
falling for some time

Until the pressure of the resulting wind
feels normal
and I relax

When I strike the ground
my limbs will be broken,
my head will hit hard

Forever changed.

This has happened several times
and each time
my broken limbs heal

I am different than I once was
I walk with a limp
The changes have defined me
to the children running on the street

"There is the old man"
they laugh
gleefully chasing
through summer days.

WARMUP

THE OATH- THE SUPREMACY OF THE WILL AND DISCIPLINE

At some point, you make a decision
and your path is set.

In youth you think in terms of do-overs
and for a while you can get away with it.

But eventually your choices stick.
You extend too far past the starting point
and you realize with a bit of a shock
that you are responsible for the consequences of your choices.

But we are built to be frivolous in youth
so take a deep breath
and celebrate the children
and appreciate the passage of time and what it brings.

I made an oath in my 20s. The oath was built on a desire. I wanted to see what it was like to practice martial arts for the rest of my life. When I made the oath my path was set. Now I get to see what happens.

FIVE LEVELS

“In the radiance of the setting sun, we either sing and give thanks or clamour and bewail the approach of old age.”

(from an old taoist book of poems that I read in my youth and then gave away to someone who needed it more than I did at the time.)

LEVELS OF DEVELOPMENT

People undergo level changes over their lives. These changes are not abrupt. Instead we are marked by the nature of our physicality and by attitudes, perspectives and emotions that slowly shift as we live out our lives (Mind, Body, Spirit). This transformation is not static nor does it act like a series of concrete steps. Instead we tend to shift up and down and sometimes we behave more maturely with some aspect

of ourselves and not in other ways. Eventually though we tend to move on the average towards greater maturity in level.

You can describe level changes in many ways. Below is the scheme that I was taught, borrowed from my Asian teachers, derived from several spiritual sources including Bhuddism and Shinto. My martial arts practice has been guided by the recognition of these levels. In each era of my life I have had different objectives and my purposes has been to understand each objective as it has come upon me.

You start out as a beginner. And then...

REACHING THE FIRST LEVEL: MASTERING THE BASICS (APPROXIMATELY 15 TO 30 YEARS OF AGE)

This level is about establishing your objectives and coming up with a purpose.

"In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, in the experts mind there are few."

To be a beginner means that you have jumped into something new. It means that you are willing to grow and to learn. Initially you are embryonic, vital, naive and full of potential. Everything starts out full of potential, opportunity, and promise.

THE SIGNS THAT YOU ARE NEAR THE FIRST LEVEL

You have found your legs, made a commitment, and you have begun your journey but you have not yet arrived. There are many paths to travel and its obvious when you are no longer just a beginner.

In practice: You can demonstrate mastery of the **basics** of a weapon set. You understand that there are **fundamental principles** and you have begun to utilize these principles in life and in practice. You are capable of independent study and growth though you may not always do this.

We look for a strong connection to the ground, an understanding of timing and distancing, and that the eyes that look strongly at the opponent. We also look for evidence that these abilities are being utilized in other parts of your life as well.

THE SECOND LEVEL: FEARLESSNESS (20 TO 40)

At this level and you are filled with **zealous energy** and **Instinctive Reaction**. You will also manifest chaos and wildness. You are sure of yourself and you are capable of

reckless abandon as you "throw yourself onto your opponent's spear" in an effort to defeat your opponent. This makes you dangerous to yourself and to others.

Surprisingly, you may also be a great teacher because of your zealous beliefs and wild competence. This combination of qualities is quite cavalier and charismatic despite the fact that you may look back at this stage of your life and recognize just how wrong you have been!

I appreciate this stage. People at the second level should not be censured. They should be given space and some responsibility for contributing. They require a light touch as well as an occasional firm hand and can challenge their teachers.

THE SIGNS

We look for competency in free sparring at this level.

THE THIRD LEVEL: SELF CONTROL AND INTUITION (30 TO 50)

A story:

"As a young zealous martial artist I had learned to question my limits. I had been shown that I could overcome much through acts of will and discipline. I endeavoured to develop an impeccable punch by doing 1000 punches a day for a year (I apologize. I had said six years in the workshop. It was a more modest one year). I was preparing to go to our Special Training where I would face many of my peers in sparring. I practiced intensely day in and out and when Special Training arrived, I believed that I was prepared.

I had overtrained. During that sparring practice one opponent with different timing blasted me and I was knocked out. My head instructor, Mr. Ohshima revived me which is an interesting story in its own right and when I woke up I was devastated.

I left that special training in shock and I almost quit. I went into seclusion as much as I could and had to rethink a few things. During that time I had a dream about a knight facing a dragon in a mountain pass.

In that dream I was the knight. The dragon was jealously defending the pass against travelers and the village was suffering. I walked into the village and asked "Is there anything to do around here?" (ref. Iron John by Bly) The villagers told me of the dragon and I decided to take it on with the supreme confidence that only a young zealot can have. I attacked the dragon by riding right down into its lair and facing it directly. With supreme overconfidence I swung my sword and was soundly pummelled into oblivion...

I lived, luckily enough, and with help from someone unknown, dragged myself to an Inn where I stayed with seven friends, all weird, all outliers, and I realized that I was not without flaw. I felt sorry for myself and a shamefully beat myself up with the knowledge that I was not the brave hero that I believed I was. Over time I pulled myself together and realized that I did not need to give up. In the succour of that Inn, among friends and comfort I re-thought my entire understanding of martial practice from one of reckless bravado and youthful vitality one where I could still face my opponent despite having limitations.

When I left the Inn, I walked up the mountain and approached the dragon but this time with a calm demeanour. Instead of fighting the beast, I made friends with him. He was still dangerous and when I moved to pass him I used timing and awareness to slip by.”

To pass into the third level you will face something larger than you and you will lose. Although shaken to your very core, you will recover your resolve. Then, armed with self awareness, humility, tenacity, and discipline you learn **self control, calmness** in the face of chaos, and you develop **Intuition**. Because you have been soundly defeated you will have learned humility.

THE SIGNS

We look for subtle understanding of technique and the ability to realistically use that understanding through grips, locks and pummelling.

COMMUNITY (30 TO...)

Over time your sensitivity and humility continue to expand as you continue to face yourself strictly. I think that sometimes a similar state has been identified in other disciplines as "**Near Enlightenment**". This is too ostentatious for me though!

At this point you realize very deeply that you are a part of something far larger than yourself but you are not quite ready to give yourself completely over to it. Instead, you choose to give back as a way of expanding and as a first step towards a larger context. You see yourself more and more reflected in others. Your awareness and compassion extend outward to the community and you become a fountainhead for others.

THE SIGNS

We look for a mastery of powerful throws and takedowns at this level and the ability to fight from a distance. At this point you care for more than just yourself. and this manifests in the rest of your life.

THE FIFTH LEVEL: SPIRITUALITY

You begin to realize how vast the martial world is and how little you actually know. Whats more, you really understand the metaphor of practice. When this realization becomes profound you step into the realm of spirituality. This is the very beginning of a deeper **Enlightenment** and is characterized by the threshold of a door. You are preparing for your own death. Friends and family pass and this no longer frightens you. Standing on the threshold you look outwards and what do you see?

THE SIGNS

We look for martial arts manifested as health practices, how to practice and teach in a way that encourages health, and for a strong spirit even as the physical body declines.

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These levels are not just a made up way to rank people in a martial arts class. They are levels that people go through in life. When you practice martial arts change that you undergo get manifested in your training. This is cool. We want to recognize such level changes as well as the feats, quests, and vigils that our members achieve. The level changes above are deep and meaningful. How do you measure or grade such things?

The answer is that a leader can only give their opinion. Length of time practiced, quality and performance in daily practice, and performance during a test of prowess all give evidence of level. It's tricky to do this for several reasons. If recognizing level changes ever gets in the way of human growth or for that matter practice, then it is no longer useful and it ought to be dropped.

ADDENDUM TO THE FIFTH LEVEL....

MY CURRENT ADMONITIONS FOR LASTING A LONG TIME!

DON'T GO AGAINST NATURE

Don't go against Nature means to not make yourself comfortable all the time. Specifically, expose yourself to cold and to hot and do this on purpose. Also expose yourself to natural dirt. So roll in the grass, get dirt under your fingernails, and go swimming in the lake. Don't swim in polluted water if you can help it.

MOVE AT THE EDGE

Move at the edge is about exercise and recovery. Find your limits and play on the edge of your limits no matter what your limits are. Move a lot, lift heavy things, move through your entire range of motion, and move quickly at times. Moving at the edge of your limits implies rest and recovery time as well as pushing yourself to figure out what your real limits are and to extend your limits. Get enough sleep. Take time off. Have fun.

USE DISCRETION WHEN CONSUMING

Attending to what you consume means to eat good proteins, good fats, good carbs, fiber, and micronutrients and most importantly to practice discipline about when you eat by following food restriction practices such as intermittent fasting and not eating too much in the first place. This also means to avoid pollutants and to get enough oxygen. Worry about balancing food intake on a weekly or even a monthly basis.

PSYCHO SPIRITUAL FACTORS

Psycho spiritual factors mean to face your fears and face yourself. Looking at yourself deeply and meditating are ways to do this.

THE OPPOSITE OF ALL OF THIS:

Keep warm and comfortable all the time, use harsh cleaners to keep your house disinfected, stay up late and look at TV and cell phones when you are trying to sleep, dont exercise or only do easy things, dont ever be hungry, eat crap for food, drink lots, hover over your keyboards and barely breath (never breath deeply), let your various anxieties and neuroses run your life, avoid fearful things, wear lots of deodorant, makeup, and ignore when you are breathing or touching complex and unnatural chemicals. Take lots of drugs.

Nothing is really new perhaps. The sages emphasized the WILL over all though. Discipline and tenacity are where it's at.

Check out these videos:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6vJQ_m32UAM

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NChyDtupmkk>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uRR8aSCY3yw>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LpNNO2s-dos>