

~~The Art Of Fighting Without Fighting...~~

(Why Has Erle Montaigne Never Taught Me How To Fight?)

Nasser Butt

I don't think there are many people alive, martial artists and non-martial artists alike, who have not come across what is considered to be Bruce Lee's seminal work – Enter The Dragon! It was the release of this movie that planted the martial arts firmly on the Western psyche, as “Kung-Fu Fighting” took hold of the 70's generation! A hold that has only gotten stronger with the passing of years... albeit the standards having declined as martial arts today have become more sports-orientated and a multi-million pound revenue generating industry!

Packed with bone crunching action, the movie also represented many of Lee's philosophical ideas on both the martial arts and the martial artist. One of these memorable scenes takes place on board a junk, as the modern-day gladiators head towards Han's martial arts tournament.

Parsons, a Kiwi, fighter, passes time on the junk by bullying its crew and wanting to show his prowess as a fighter. He approaches Lee, who is trying hard to ignore him and the dialogue that follows has become a part of cinematic history:

Parsons: Do I bother you?

Lee: Don't waste yourself.

Parsons: What's your style?

Lee: My style? You can call it the art of fighting without fighting.

Parsons: The art of fighting without fighting? Show me some of it.

Lee: Later.

Of course, what ensues has been commented upon endlessly for the last 4 decades or so! Lee tricks Parsons into a smaller boat on the pretence that they row over to an island where he will show him his style. No sooner has Parsons stepped into the boat, Lee releases the rope mooring the smaller vessel to the junk and hands it over to those that Parsons was tormenting earlier. Lee has defeated his opponent, who is left sitting helplessly in a waterlogged boat in the middle of a rough sea, without a punch being thrown!

The story being told here is not new. Martial arts legends are abound with stories of masters who, when challenged on a boat, would use a small rowboat and row their

challenger out to an island on the pretence for a fight and then leave them there, thus defeating their opponents through wisdom.

Lee, no doubt, had this in mind whilst shooting this particular segment of the movie.

No less an authority than Sun Tzu also makes a similar comment in the 'Art of War':

“...Those who win every battle are not skilful – those who render others' armies helpless without fighting are the best of all.”

So what of the 'art of fighting without fighting'? Is it merely the perceived idea of being able to defeat your opponent through wisdom alone as the legends and classics suggest, or could there be more to it than that???

What if the physical attack has already occurred, how would this apply or lend itself then? How would I fight my opponent without fighting?

Martial arts at their best are mediocre fighting systems! We cannot use forms or fixed katas on the street for combat purposes. In fact, it can be said in all honesty, that most modern martial artists would fail miserably on the street against a good street fighter, as they are unable to distinguish the difference between self-defence and their own martial art! What works in the dojo, would probably get you killed outside!

There are several factors that can lead us to the above conclusions. Perhaps, the biggest factor today is that most martial arts are practiced as a sport, thereby, losing their original purposes – the art of war, kill or be killed!

Would be fighters hone their skills for a cage or ring, expecting to compete with their opponents for a specific duration of rounds. They are versed in the rules of the said cage or ring and more often than not abide by them strictly so that they are not disqualified from competition, causing them to repress in some cases their natural instincts! Hours are spent 'sparring' with opponents of different size and weight, developing reflexes that are useful in the ring but disastrous on the street!

'Masters' show off their prowess in the dojo by fending off students who come charging at them from a distance, with raised arms, shouting as if to warn of an impending attack...

In the street there are no rules, no warnings and the attack occurs in your face!!! You win no belts, no titles, if you are lucky; you get to go home alive!

Years of training the brain to attack 'legal' targets in the dojo or ring cannot be undone in a split second on the streets. Your brain will instinctively behave the way you have trained it to behave in the ring! For example, I have trained with and come across Muay Thai fighters who can kick like mules, put them in a street fight scenario and they will execute a kick exactly the way they would do it in the ring – above or below the knee!

Their training prevents them from instinctively attacking the knee itself, which would end the fight in an instant!

Take a look at a list of what are deemed official fouls in Muay Thai and you'll begin to understand what the fighters must train themselves NOT to do and how this could be their undoing in a street fight without any rules:

Fouls

18.1. Biting, eye gouging, spitting, or head butting.

18.2. Wrestling, back or arm locks or any similar judo or wrestling hold.

18.3. Deliberately falling on his opponent.

18.4. Holding the ropes for any reason.

18.5. Swearing or the use of abusive language during the match.

18.6. Knocking out or injuring his opponent after the referee has ordered the match to stop for any reason.

18.7. Deliberately striking the groin area.

To be penalized by the deduction of 1 point for each time committed.

A boxer who has been hit in the groin may request a 5-minute break before continuing the match.

So, what has the above got to do with 'art of fighting without fighting'?

Firstly, that fighting and competing for a prize are a human mindset, whereas in nature animals 'fight' to survive. This is true whether two animals are combating for the survival of their genes or simply to prevent themselves becoming the evening meal of the other! In other words, animals instinctively attempt to survive an attack and do whatever it takes.

The forms or katas of martial arts should be looked upon as a way of developing certain body mechanics and skills, such as, timing, distance, balance, co-ordination etc. All of which are the required prerequisites of combat. Techniques are there to teach us principles, which once learned, render the techniques as useless and they should be discarded.

Once we have gained competency with our form or kata as well as the various other drills, we then move out of our martial art and step into the realm of self-defence. Note, self-defence and martial arts is NOT the same thing!

Self-defence is where we take all the skills that we have acquired from our martial arts training and put them into a realistic attack situation.

Here, two training partners (or more) play out a realistic attack and defence scenario. The objective is not to compete, but rather to learn!

The 'attacker' would attack from a realistic distance and not come screaming from a mile away with his hands raised! Take the opening movement of the small san sau from Taijiquan, as an example:

The attacker here must be able to hit and connect with his opponent with his hook punch. Likewise, the defender must be at the right distance to connect with neigwan and stomach (ST) 9 in response and not only that, he or she must ensure that their hands connect with the appropriate target, only then will the correct body mechanics be learned!

Of course, for the object of learning, both the attack and defence would initially be devoid of any real power or speed and done from a static position. But over a course of time as our understanding and skills improve, power, speed and movement would gradually be introduced into the equation, until one day, our attacker (wearing appropriate safety gear) would launch an all out attack and it would be up to the defender to get his defence right!

This is true sparring.

As one trains one's body for self-defence, likewise, the mind must also undergo a fundamental change.

When attacked or faced with a situation where confrontation is unavoidable don't fight, rather look to survive the situation! This is the animal instinct. An action of the 'reptilian' brain! You do whatever it takes to neutralise the attack as quickly as possible. Do not look to compete with your opponent!

We do not play the 'fighting' game, whereby you attack and I defend. Then I attack and you defend. No! As soon as your opponent moves you move and attack and attack, and attack until he is no more!

We learn to break 'switches' or responses, which our opponents expect thereby, sowing confusion in their mind. When my opponent attacks, I do not step backwards and block and be where he expects me to be, rather I move forwards at an angle and attack!

These are the 'broken rhythms', which Lee refers to in his last movie – "The Game of Death". No doubt, he is once again echoing an older warrior, Miyamoto Musashi:

"The way to win in a battle... is to know the rhythms of the specific opponents, and use rhythms that your opponents do not expect, producing formless rhythms from rhythms of wisdom."

So, in my opinion, here is another way to look at the concept of ‘the art of fighting without fighting’ – this is where a system teaches us how to move to survive as opposed to ‘fight’ and leads me nicely to the subject of my current training!

For almost two and a half years now I, with a few like-minded friends, have been burning the proverbial rubber and clocking up the miles attending Erle Montaigne’s instructors’ only training sessions. The sessions originally started in Camerton, Bath before moving to their current location of Llangadog, Wales. Although originally planned for instructors only, Erle opened up the sessions to their senior students as well.

What he has done over the past few years is to have taken his students on a journey, a tour you may say, of a well-trodden destination. However, the difference here is that not only has he shown us the common sites but, also, has taken us off the beaten track to truly understand what we have before us.

This is a rare and invaluable sharing of a wealth of knowledge and experience, especially in an age where most ‘Masters’ walk into a room, aloof, share very little, let alone spend time mucking in with their students, collect their extortionist fees and leave!

The sessions began with the one-strike kill methods and have since moved onto the multiple striking methods, showing in depth the most vulnerable areas of the human body. En route, we have also looked at conditioning, the development of the physical body as well understanding how to train and enhance internal power.

Body mechanics have been taught via the Yang Lu-Ch’an old form, Baguazhang and Xingyiquan, as well as stand alone training methods such as Long Har Ch’uan and the small and large san sau and a host of others.

Correct push hands, both single and double, have and are being taught in immense detail to ensure not only correct body mechanics and structure, but also how this translates into a real fight!

The underlying principles behind each posture of the Yang Lu-Ch’an form have been shown in large frame and small, translating the movements into the ideas behind small circle Chin-Na and close quarter combat. As have the ideas behind the linear form of Baguazhang, shown at its ‘qi-activation’ level, alongside the 5 element fists of Xingyi. Knives, sticks, empty hands, yielding, sticking, folding, kicking... the list is endless and ongoing with each session revealing a new gem or an old friend in a new light.

It was during these sessions, especially whilst learning the “physical side” of the system that I had an epiphany – Erle doesn’t know how to ‘fight’ nor does his system teach you how to ‘fight’! Erle, in my opinion, is teaching the ‘other’ side to the ‘art of fighting without fighting’. The side where combat becomes inevitable, yet one still does not fight. We merely “move to survive” as he says, and look to end the conflict instantly.

His system is based upon the idea of survival – doing whatever it takes to remove the danger at any cost by striking the body along its most vulnerable pathways, using fluid, natural body mechanics, which allow you to generate powerful strikes from short distances with destructive consequences!

Isn't this exactly what animals do when in a combative situation? Do they compete or stand there trading blows? No! They look for a way in and instantly attack the most vulnerable part, usually the neck in most cases, and continue with their attack until they prevail.

The instructors' sessions are an invaluable set of sessions, which have and continue to be a master class on the neijia. Erle has clearly shown and demonstrated why the 3 so called family of the 'internal' way are essentially the same. But more importantly, he continues to show their practical combative ideas with no nonsense or exotic techniques!

It is imperative that those of us who purport to study and represent the system both, as instructors and students, need to make the most of these sessions to truly understand what the Erle Montaigne system is about. The 'art of fighting without fighting' is there, being demonstrated right under our very nose in all its guises. It is up to us, the practitioners, to understand and train the system with due diligence. There is no point claiming to be doing the 'supreme ultimate, yet not knowing how to throw a punch or deal with an attack! All systems are ultimately, rightly or wrongly, judged by the students and instructors they produce.

So, you can learn to fight or realize that... "Humans fight, animals survive – move to survive!" This is the Erle Montaigne and the WTBA way, and that is the reason why Erle has never taught me how to fight!

To end... I have just seen a demonstration, on video; by no less an authority than William C.C. Chen, showing a variety of Taijiquan strikes or punches as he calls them to a live audience. Dressed in the obligatory silk pyjamas and wearing a pair of MMA mitts on his hands, he strikes a focus pad being held by a student in a way that would embarrass an amateur boxer! This statement may offend some... but they need to ask themselves why?

I simply thank God for Erle Montaigne!

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