

The Mystique of Martial Arts:
A Response to Professor McFarlane

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I must begin by thanking Professor McFarlane for his care and critique of my article (KEENAN 1989). The article was intended to be provocative if not very ambitious. It is in large part a descriptive piece about popular culture in the West and how it attempts to embrace the traditional martial arts of the East. I performed no sociological analysis that might have provided a full picture of what a statistically significant portion of modern martial artists do and think. It is interesting that Dr. Stewart McFarlane—who teaches the only university-level course on the martial arts in the U.K.—has taken up the cudgel, for many of the ideas expressed were worked out in conversations with Minoru Kiyota—who is the only Buddhistologist to teach a university-level course in the martial arts (in this case *kendō*) in the U.S.A. It pleases me that McFarlane found my article sometimes perceptive; perhaps that is the best one can hope for! Such a careful reading deserves an equally careful response.

Although there is agreement between McFarlane and myself on the broad issues about martial arts practice, I find most of his specific criticisms wide of the mark and would like to both clarify my critique and expand my criticism. I will respond to McFarlane's points of argument in the order he presents them.

His first point is that I claim that "Eastern martial arts have been appropriated by the West and shorn of all spiritual and humanistic value and are now practiced for athletic prowess or street-smart fighting." Fortunately, being of an usually temperate character, I

simply did not say this. Rather, I said that “martial arts can easily be taken out of their East Asian context, shorn of all spiritual or humanistic value, etc.” (p. 285). My point is, I think, obvious to any impartial observer of popular Western culture. It does happen that YMCAs and YWCAs offer courses on karate and self-defense without any reference to the traditional ethos that accompanied such practice in the East. The United States Marines do the same.

A more recent image of martial artists (however distasteful to serious practitioners everywhere) is offered by the now famed teenage mutant ninja turtles, who last summer appeared prominently in the movies, the television, and on sundry cereal boxes. They manifest little trace of any Eastern context, although one turtle did engage in meditation, mimicking *mūdra* signs for the event. Yet, shouts of “kawabunga, dude!” hardly translate the more traditional “*katsu!*”. The techniques of the various martial practices are indeed portable from culture to culture, but the contextualizing understanding of their meaning is perhaps not so portable.¹ In its place a grand mystique has grown up to invest the martial arts with a spiritual vigor and a purported inner wisdom. This mystique, I argue, results from the difficulty of translating Eastern spiritual traditions, resulting often in an incomplete and confusing selection of parts and pieces of that tradition. I focus on the popular images as they are formed by that confusion and enlivened by that mystique. This does not mean that I focus on the “pathological or the brutal,” as McFarlane claims, but merely that I claim the “arts” have often been transmitted either without the background web of cultural meanings that give them significance, or with a distorted understanding of that background. The mutant turtles are not really pathological, however bizarre their meditative practice may be!

Secondly, McFarlane maintains that I claim (1) that the East Asian martial arts evolved in a context of Zen Buddhism, (2) that in the West they are almost always divorced from this *Mahāyāna* context, and (3) that their present spiritual ethos is a “warmed-over Taoism.” McFarlane’s basic criticism is that, unduly influenced by D. T. Suzuki, I simplify and idealize the relationship between *Mahāyāna* and Zen, on the one hand, and Eastern martial arts, on the other, neglecting

¹ This idea I have taken from Lewis Lancaster, who in a speech at the International Congress of Asian and North African Studies at the University of Toronto, 21 August 1990, presented some very interesting ideas about the “portability” of traditions.

the complex web of elements and processes in Sino-Japanese thought and cultures that have pervaded the martial arts traditions.

I readily admit to being influenced by D. T. Suzuki. But, whereas it may be accurate to criticize the one-sidedness of Suzuki's lengthy essays on Zen and Japanese culture, it is hardly reasonable to critique my meager twelve-page article for not including the developmental complexities of the martial arts traditions. One simply has to leave some things for discussion elsewhere.² Furthermore, it seems to me that McFarlane is working with a particularly wooden understanding of the evolution of Chinese traditions. He lists such concepts as *ch'i*, *yin-yang*, *wu-hsing*, Confucian ideas, Chinese medicine, alchemy, and ritual methods, etc. as "elements and processes" that have also pervaded the martial arts. Yet, in point of historical fact, from at least Han times on, Chinese thinkers and practitioners fused many of these elements, although not always happily.³ McFarlane seems to think that each term he invokes represents a discrete reality. That is not the case, for words do not validate the discrete realities of things. Most of the elements adduced were incorporated within Taoist practice, and that in turn formed the general context within which Chinese Buddhism, including Ch'an, was articulated and formed. To say then that martial arts evolved in a context of Ch'an is not to exclude any of those other elements, even if no listing is given. And to state that my "concern with the textual and doctrinal formulations of Buddhism has led [me] to neglect the ways in which Buddhist, Zen, Confucian, and Taoist notions are integrated and embedded in Sino-Japanese thought and culture" is to offer an etiology for a non-existent disease! One should rather inquire why McFarlane equates not treating something with not knowing it.

McFarlane's next point, however, is well taken. Often the rhetoric of an argument takes on a force of its own, moves ahead, drags our reasoning along, and bludgeons with the heavy hand of a pseudo-logic any counter insight or idea. Alas! I was guilty of such an intemperate logical blitzkrieg in my article, when I said that "it is

² In the volume the article originally belongs to (KIYOTA and KINOSHITA 1990), there are other articles detailing these developments.

³ I wrote an M. A. thesis at the University of Pennsylvania on the Han dynasty philosopher Yang Hsiung, who authored not only the Confucian *Model Sayings (Fa Yen)*, but also the Taoist Classic of the Great Mystery (*Tai-hsüan Ching*). My initial interest in his synthetic efforts quickly waned when it became apparent that he merely amalgamated ideas, with no attempt to synthesize their underlying notions.

. . . my contention that martial arts in the West are almost always divorced from this Mahāyāna context” (p. 286). That is a clear overstatement. What I should have said and now do say is that martial arts in the West are quite frequently so divorced. In all other parts of the article I am more temperate and balanced, and I offer my mea culpas for the above slip into rhetorically-driven and flawed logic. They say that even Homer nods.

The phrase “warmed-over Taoism” was intended to elicit a response. It remains my contention that the foundational Mahāyāna doctrinal notions of emptiness and dependent co-arising, which translate into the concrete practices of wisdom and compassion, tend to be marginalized by many martial arts practitioners in favor of a mystique of spontaneity and no-mind, a mystique that is neither Mahāyāna nor Taoism. Thus, I characterized the present popular ethos surrounding the martial arts as “warmed-over Taoism.” I did explicitly confine this characterization to “martial arts in the West” (p. 286). Therefore, McFarlane’s rhetorical questions about whether I think the ideas of Tao-an, Hui-yüan, Tao-sheng, and Seng-chao are also warmed-over are all quite wide of the mark and result from nothing more than inattentive reading.

The third of McFarlane’s points is that (1) I have misrepresented Ch’an and Sino-Japanese interpretations of emptiness, *mushin*, and morality by claiming that the tradition at times reads *mushin* in a centrist fashion, most particularly in the case of Takuan. Furthermore, he claims that (2) I misunderstand the nature of spontaneity in classical Taoist texts and martial arts practice, and (3) fail to acknowledge the moral ambiguities generated by some Buddhist texts, including my “own Yogācāra authorities.” McFarlane takes up these points in his section on “*Mushin*, Emptiness, and Morals.” There he claims that “most texts and commentators understood . . . the concepts of no-mind, Buddha nature, and emptiness . . . metaphorically rather than literally.” That, I suggest, is a surprisingly broad generalization that neither has nor can find textual support. I would argue that the actual history of Buddhist doctrinal development presents cases where texts and commentators clearly took these terms literally, and other cases where they deliteralized them. From the very beginning of classical Indian Yogācāra, there was a felt need to insist that one not discontinue practice because of a belief that the ultimate Dharma Body of Buddha awakening was not distinct from them. Asaṅga ends his *Mahāyānasamgraha* with the advice:

(It is objected that) since Dharma Body of Buddhas is beginningless, not distinct (from sentient beings), and infinite, there is no need to make effort in order to (obtain) it. Here is a verse (on this):

If the attainment of Buddhahood is not distinct, and is infinite,
And if this causes beings to abandon their efforts to attain it,
Then that attainment [of Buddhahood] would be forever causeless.

But discarding the cause is not correct.

(ASAṄGA 1989, p. 267)

It is not at all difficult to find in the literature texts that present the innately pure mind as a non-empty, pure reality, lying at the base of defiled consciousness. References can be given to a host of Mahāyāna texts, both in Sanskrit and in Chinese and Japanese: the *Śrīmālādevīsīmaṇada-sūtra*, *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra*, and the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, to name but a few (see ASAṄGA 1989, Introduction, pp. 14–32). The translations of Paramārtha evince a clear desire to affirm the sole reality of an inner pure consciousness (KEENAN 1991, forthcoming). Dōgen returns again and again to the refutation of any notion of an intrinsic Buddha nature (TANAHASHI 1985, pp. 4–5, 156–57 and KIM 1987, pp. 102–67). Like Asaṅga, he felt that that could easily mislead people into neglecting practice. In more recent days, the works of Matsumoto Shirō and Hakamaya Noriaki have imitated the spirit of Dōgen by challenging the notion of Buddha nature. They argue that many understandings of Buddha nature are in fact not Buddhist, but rather a monistic, centrist version of *dhātuvāda*, a term coined by Matsumoto to signify the unBuddhist belief (*vāda*) that there is an ultimately pure realm (*dhātu*) (HAKAMAYA 1989, 1990 and MATSUMOTO 1989). My point is that the tradition includes both those who see an ultimate reality realm, a Buddha nature, apart from emptiness, and those who see nothing apart from emptiness. The former are, in terminology I borrow from MAGLIOLA (1984), centrists, for they center their minds and practices on that reality, even if they consider it to be ineffable. The latter are proponents of emptiness, the *sūnyatāvādin*. Far from being generalizations, these trajectories of Mahāyāna thought are abundantly and clearly attested in the literature and it is unjustified simply to ignore them with a claim that “everyone knew that.”

McFarlane also accuses me of taking Takuan too literally. It should have been noted, however, that here I am merely repeating the criticism leveled at Takuan’s passage about the empty sword by

Robert Aitken, one of the most respected Zen masters and the founder of The Diamond Sangha near Honolulu (AITKEN 1984, p. 5). He, of course, has a different agenda, being concerned about the mistaken idea that Zen transcends ethical concerns. I was content merely to cite this passage without taking on a broader examination of Takuan. (The article was only twelve pages!) But the passages McFarlane himself cites invite further comment. In fact, they themselves counter the contention that martial arts advocates make no claim to Buddhist insights! The passage on page 407 (above) presents Takuan's ideas on the non-abiding no-mind (*mushin*), which he equates with the "original mind." He says that "if one is able to thoroughly practice this mind of no-mind, one will not stop on a single thing, and will not lose a single thing. Constantly like being filled with water, it exists in this body and responds in functioning when needed." This is the notion of no-mind and spontaneity which I criticize. Here, no-mind is directly equated with the "original mind" of awakening. Here, spontaneity is not a learned reflex, but a flowing out from the inner mind of no-mind. This mind hesitates not, where I would want one to hesitate indeed, to note just what it is one is about to do. Takuan is clearly Taoist in the above description, where "the not-stopping on a single thing and not losing a single thing" echoes Lao Tzu's "do nothing and nothing will not be done," and the water-filling image alludes to the many similar images in the *Tao te ching*. McFarlane accuses me of misunderstanding the notion of spontaneity in classical Taoist texts, but these images from Takuan are sufficient for my point—that there indeed is a notion of a spontaneity which occurs naturally once one is in harmony with the inner nature. The next passage he quotes says that "if the core of the mind and like-mindedness are achieved, not one in ten thousand affairs will ever turn out poorly." There is no talk here about the ambiguity of ethical concerns, the last concern of McFarlane, nor about learned spontaneity, only about achieving the core of the mind, after which all will turn out right. This is a Taoist reading and worlds apart from the Mahāyāna notion of spontaneity as a characteristic of buddha. It is not that I here disagree with McFarlane's notion of ethical ambiguity or spontaneity as the result of learned reflexes. But neither flow directly from the achievement of the core mind, as Takuan states. The point about ethics is that one ought indeed to abide at some point. To float free from any context whatsoever does leave one aloof and detached. Even though

Takuan speaks about the traditional Confucian virtues, he takes them all to refer to the “core of the mind,” that is, to the mind of no-mind. The focus remains on achieving that core, not on the discernment of the bodhisattva who, reengaged in the concrete world, must needs stop to abide either here or there. It is only, I suggest, such a concrete abiding that accounts for the creative employment of skillful means. Takuan evinces no such casuistry as does the passage from Asaṅga’s *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, for Asaṅga is trying theoretically to envisage concrete situations, whereas for Takuan, all flows naturally and spontaneously from the achievement of the core mind!

For his fourth point, McFarlane claims that I “believe that from a Yogācāra viewpoint, the association of martial arts attainments with Buddhist soteriological concepts and disciplines is illegitimate.” Far from believing this statement, I am not at all sure what it means. Perhaps the point is: what kind of association is under discussion? My point is merely that there is no particularly close connection between martial arts and the practice of the Mahāyāna path. I do not trivialize the attainments of martial artists by comparing them to Western athletes. Rather, I question McFarlane’s apparent dismissal of the skills of Western athletes. Sadaharu Oh was not merely a long-ball hitter, but also embodied the traditional values associated in Japan with the martial arts. Obviously, both martial artists and Western athletes may remain self-centered and prideful. But there are martial arts practitioners who do make claims for inner harmony and wisdom that few Western athletes would be comfortable making. McFarlane conveniently ignores the evidences I did provide and then claims that no martial artist confuses “no-mind, non-discursive thought, and bodily awareness, as described by martial artists and Zen practitioners,” with true awakening. However, the passages from Takuan he himself has provided expose the falsity of this claim, as shown above. The term “no-mind” is itself a hoary Buddhist term for the mind of wisdom and emptiness, that is, for the awakened mind. Furthermore, Takuan does speak of swordsmanship as a path to *prajñā*, and *prajñā* is synonymous with the awakened mind, as I mentioned on p. 288. The medieval *waka* poem I gave on p. 289 gives further evidence of the opinion that the swordsman acts without thinking or reflecting in perfect emptiness, that is, in the awakened state of a buddha, for no one else has attained perfect emptiness. I also wonder why McFarlane has con-

flated martial artists with Zen practitioners. I certainly have in no wise questioned the practice of Zen anywhere in my article and think it is rather a low blow for McFarlane to suggest otherwise. I am indeed heartened by McFarlane's disclaimer that martial artists he knows do not make such a grand claim. Yet there are many in the West who do. I've known a few in my time!

The fifth point, McFarlane maintains, is that I assert that modern martial artists claim they have Buddhist insights attained solely through their martial arts training. In fact, my assertion is much more nuanced. What I did say is that, "martial arts . . . when seen as spiritual disciplines, in the absence of the Japanese cultural context," are mistakenly thought themselves "to issue in wondrous spontaneity and to embody the mind of no-mind that is awakening" (p. 294). My point is that there is a popular martial arts mystique that grows up in the vacuum created by the omission of the traditional ethos, a mystique that, because of its half-boiled, warmed-over appropriation of themes from the history of Mahāyāna and Taoism, proffers an image of an inner warrior trained not only in technique, but also in wisdom. I do not conclude that Westerners "should pursue modern ways," such as skiing. But I do wonder why, since there is no necessary linkage between Buddhist practice and Eastern martial arts, one might not extend the Buddho-Taoist ethos to other athletic and artistic endeavors. After all, there is an ancient and respected tradition of *mens sana in corpore sano*. Minoru Kiyota, my teacher in things Buddhist, argues for the integration of liberal arts and martial arts (KIYOTA 1991, forthcoming). It seems to me to be a denigration of the accomplishments of Western athletes to dismiss their attainments as somehow inferior. If memory serves, the basketball star Julius Irving was awarded a Masters degree from the Department of Fine Arts of Temple University for his graceful and artistic play on the hardwood floor. It is true that Western sports do lack such a well-developed ideology, as McFarlane states. But he is simply uninformed in stating that they also lack a sense of tradition. Why then are old baseball cards worth so much? It is true that I overlooked the socializing aspects of healthy martial arts training. Indeed, it was not my intent to treat that topic at all.

The underlying question, of course, is whether or not the Asian ethos that accompanied the traditional practice of martial arts is portable, whether or not it is able to be transported outside Eastern cultures. Lewis Lancaster makes a relevant distinction between those

spiritual traditions that revere the dead and those that revere the ancestors. All peoples have their dead, and traditions that focus on the dead can appeal to all peoples. But ancestors are specific to their own cultures and one cannot share them with others who do not enter into that culture. It is perhaps the presence of lineage lines in the martial arts that occasions the confusion. Although these lineages are continued in Western cultures, there inevitably seems to be a falling away from the old cultural values and a consequent obfuscation that issues in a mystique. That was my point in recounting the story of the *ninja* boy: popular Western culture shadows the martial arts with a mystic aura. I see no reason why the practice of basketball could not become a “spiritual” practice, one indeed which is more culturally consonant with Western values of individual and group reliance. On a basketball court, there is no *rōshi*. Each player encounters and learns from his or her betters, and so the masters constantly shift. One wonders whether within a Western cultural complex it is healthy to inculcate the obediential master-disciple relationship demanded by most traditional martial arts practices. Indeed, one wonders why there is an absence of team sports among traditional martial arts. In point of fact, Western athletic endeavors are often spiritual for their participants. I do not see how or why McFarlane claims that such activities as skiing “entail little or nothing of the engagement with the world.” No one who ever skied down the reality of a mountain could make such a statement. I would urge the acceptance of the realities of mountains, just as they are! Almost every sport talks about a flow state, where learned reflexes take over and one simply is carried spontaneously by the give and take of the action.

After his five points McFarlane continues to offer various criticisms of my article, most of which I have treated above in my comments on those five points. But one matter calls for explicit discussion. McFarlane accuses me of “adhering to” something he calls “an ultimativist and normative view of Buddhism, which is inappropriate to the way Buddhist ideas, images, and practices have engaged and functioned in traditional Chinese and Japanese society.” It is here that McFarlane’s discussion is weakest of all. He explains “ultimativist” as “the tendency to accept as legitimately ‘Buddhist’ only those concepts and concerns which relate to higher-order (*lokuttara* / *paramārtha*) attainments.” In Mahāyāna thought, there is no such higher order of concepts. The Mahāyāna notion of *paramārtha* refers not

to a different order of concepts but to the silence that abandons all concepts. It is world (*loka*) transcendent (*uttara*), not merely a higher level of worldly, philosophic discourse. It appears to me that McFarlane is working with an Abhidharma understanding of the two truths, contrasting the theoretical and absolute truth of analysis to the commonsense and always faulty truth of worldly convention. It is not, then, surprising that McFarlane fails to see the cogency of my argument that the martial arts mystique often leads away from Mahāyāna understandings of life and truth, for he apparently is not familiar with those understandings. The teaching of the two truths of ultimate meaning (*paramārta-satya*) and worldly convention (*saṃvṛtti-satya*) is central to Mahāyāna. To confuse the truth of ultimate meaning with “an abstract and speculative style” is indeed a confusion of fundamental Mahāyāna teachings.

What McFarlane intends to say is that I have an elitist and normative view, such as characterizes textual scholars. He intends to contrast the normative, doctrinal stance of a tradition with its popular traditions and does claim that such an abstract and speculative perspective is wholly inadequate to understand how traditions are lived. It is a strange objection, for the structure of my argument is that the popular, Western mystique that all but engulfs the practices of martial arts in an aura of spontaneous flow states and extraordinary wisdoms does not harmonize with the Mahāyāna teachings. Of course, I do maintain that there are normative Mahāyāna teachings. Buddhism is not just anything you make it.

In fact, the relationships between the doctrinal, normative traditions and the popular, lived traditions are not exclusionary, as McFarlane implies. It is not an either-or situation. Rather, they are mutually corrective. Popular traditions are most frequently guided by teachers, scholars, clerics, shamans, leaders, adepts, holy men and women, etc. The history of Buddhism is no exception—each school in China and Japan had, and often still has, a canon of teachings, the *p'an-chiao* systems specific to each school. Yet, the doctrinal traditions themselves are constantly challenged by popular, experiential movements and groups. Mahāyāna itself may have begun as such a popular movement from within the circles of stūpa guardians. It is then unwarranted to complain about normative perspectives as if they have no part to play in the ongoing living of the Mahāyāna path. They are not “ultimate viewpoints,” for all viewpoints are worldly and conventional. But normative judgments have always

played a crucial role in Buddhism. Unless he would dispense with the Buddha dharma (teaching) altogether, McFarlane's complaint that my so-called "ultimatism is too limiting, and [my] 'Yogācāra' criteria . . . too narrow" is frivolous. For some unexplained reason, he seems to think that because in normative Yogācāra terms one may experience a direct awareness of defiled ālaya-consciousness, the experiences described as formless wisdom states, or nenbutsu meditation, or breath-modulated meditation are to be rejected also as but experiences of defiled ālaya. That is clearly nonsense, for Yogācāra speaks not only of defiled consciousness, but of the conversion of consciousness (*āśraya-parivṛtti*) from ālaya into wisdom. I in no wise negate such practices, any more than I reject gratuitously present experiences of tranquility, loss of a sense of self, or flashes of insight. What I do reject is the wishy-washy mystique that treats martial arts as somehow privileged, while refusing, or at least failing, to enunciate their rationale.

In sum, I support martial arts, even to the point of wanting such discipline to extend to non-traditional forms of athletic practice. I reject, however, (what is to me) the all-too-apparent mystification that cloaks those arts in a Mahāyāna veneer. So in the end, ironically after so much disagreement over the specifics of his criticisms, I agree with Professor McFarlane, who both supports martial arts practice and avoids that mystique. Would that all practitioners were so clear-sighted.

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