

Be Water My Friend – Bruce Lee, Meditation and Martial Arts

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Empty your mind. Be formless, shapeless - like water. Now you put water into a cup, it becomes the cup. You put water into a bottle, it becomes the bottle. You put it in a teapot, it becomes the teapot. Now water can flow or it can crash. Be water, my friend. - Bruce Lee

This famous quote by Kung Fu movie legend Bruce Lee is hardly mumbo jumbo. The words were the result of an epiphany following a few hours of meditation.

Lee's formal teacher, Sifu Yip Man, knew the connection between meditation and fighting skills. He once told Lee that he needed to calm the mind so that he could stay centered and work with the reality of the moment during a fight.

According to Yip Man, Lee needed to be resilient enough to follow the nature of the opponents' moves, in the present moment, instead of thinking about tricks he could use against them. He needed to lose his sense of separate self. This is what Yip Man called "the art of detachment." Yip Man then instructed Lee to go inward and reflect on the lesson instead of practicing that week.

What began as an intellectual lesson soon found its birth in the real world. Lessons like this one must be learned experientially.

After a few hours of meditation, Bruce Lee hopped into a small boat on the ocean. The recent lesson upset him, and he began to question his practice. In a fit of frustration, Lee punched the water. A flood of insight came, and he realized what his instructor meant. Lee likely said it best in this quote.

Right then at that moment, a thought suddenly struck me: Wasn't this water, the very basic stuff, the essence of gung fu? Didn't the common water illustrate to me the principle of gung fu? I struck it just now, but it did not suffer hurt. Again I stabbed it with all my might, yet it was not wounded. I then tried to grasp a handful of it but it was impossible. This water, the softest substance in the world, could fit itself into any container. Although it seemed weak, it could penetrate the

hardest substance in the world. That was it! I wanted to be like the nature of water. – Bruce Lee

Yip Man was essentially telling Lee to apply the principles of meditation to his Kung Fu practice. One aspect of meditation is becoming softer. The chatter of the mind gradually calms down and tension leaves the body. Old muscle tension patterns that held trapped emotions just melt away.

With softness, you become less rigid so that you can flow with the reality of the moment instead of reacting to your own thoughts about your environment. With detachment, you are surrendering to a higher type of direct knowing that allows you to adapt to what's happening in the here and now. There is no calculation, just flow. This principle applies to martial arts and many other activities.

Bruce Lee was a living example of the fact that meditation does not make you a lazy lackadaisical blob. When a practitioner regularly releases tension in the body and mind, the changes gradually become more permanent. This frees the meditator so that there is a choice to tense particular muscles at will. If some part of your body is always tense, you don't have that choice. The same goes for the mind.

Lee was calm by default. His movements were soft and flowing. When hit by an opponent, he knew how to roll with the punches just like the water he assaulted on his boat trip. When he needed to "crash", he became a tsunami.

How Did Bruce Lee Meditate?

Did Bruce Lee meditate? That's undeniable. However, it's unclear what formal meditation technique Lee studied. Some speculate that he practiced some kind of Qigong method like the Microcosmic Orbit, but there does not appear to be evidence to back it up. The speculation might only rely on the fact that the Shaolin monks invented the early Qigong prototypes, partially to enhance a student's Kung Fu practice. These monks were the creators of Kung Fu as well.

Lee did regularly espouse the virtues of Zen, and he had a solid interest in Taoism. He did drop hints of what he experienced during practice. Here are two quotes.

Zen is not “attained” by mirror-wiping meditation, but by “self-forgetfulness in the existential ‘present’ of life here and now.” We do not “come”, we “are.” Don’t strive to become, but be. – Bruce Lee

and

To meditate means to realize the imperturbability of one's original nature. Surely, meditation can never be a process of concentration, because the highest form of thinking is negation. Negation is a state in which there is neither the positive, nor its reaction as the negative. It is a state of complete emptiness. Concentration is a form of exclusion and where there is exclusion, there is a thinker who excludes. It is the thinker, the excluder, the one who concentrates, who creates contradiction because he forms a center from which there is distraction. - Bruce Lee, The Tao of Jeet Kune Do

While Lee uses Zen terminology, this does not mean that he practiced the sitting meditation called Zazen. His words also don't demonstrate that he did not. Zazen does have a concentration component. You're focusing on the breath as the starting point at least. With advanced meditation practice, you realize the higher states that he describes above. What he describes matches up with what many advanced meditators, and some intermediate ones, from a variety of traditions express.

Furthermore, Yip Man taught a style of Kung Fu called Wing Chun. This style has a moving meditation component that has some similarities to Tai Chi. Wing Chun is one of the roots of Lee's Jeet Kune Do Kung Fu. He likely clocked in quite a few meditation hours during his martial arts practice alone.

How to Be Like Water in Everyday Life

One of the main things that keep us from the water-like resilience that Lee cultivated is the attachment to thoughts. Thoughts are addictive. Learning how to let go of the clinging to thoughts and ego is one of the keys to resilience.

This does not mean that our starting point is trying to empty the mind. Good luck with that. The starting point is what some people call mindfulness.

Mindfulness is the art of embracing thought and emotion. When a practitioner of mindfulness meditation gets distracted from the object of meditation (e.g. the breath, a mantra), he/she simply observes the distracting thought or emotion impartially and allows it to be. It's as if the meditator is the sky and the thought is a cloud. It is a process happening in the present moment.

The above process gradually calms the mind and increases equanimity. Tension is the result of the ego clinging to the familiar and pleasant and resisting what is unpleasant. The practice of mindfulness allows you to roll with the punches and kicks of life while acting authentically in each moment. Instead of identifying with the ego self, you gradually realize your authentic, true nature.

Emotional baggage is another thing that keeps us from the flow. We're creatures of habit, and the mind and body system often develops armor to protect us from harm. This can manifest in the form of tension. The tension can cause us to irrationally react to things instead of working with the reality of the here and now. Many relationships end because of this.

Using meditation, you can gradually release tension in the body over time and heal the trapped emotional wounds. As mentioned earlier, more chronic tension means less choices. Less tension means more options while working with any particular situation in life, including martial arts, a stressful job, a domestic problem and many other things.

If you want to take Bruce's advice and learn how to be like water, find a suitable meditation practice, whether it's a mindfulness technique, Tai Chi, devotional chant or something else. You'll discover over time that, even during turbulent times, you can live life as gracefully as Bruce Lee during his "whoop ass" moments.

Resources:

The Tao of Jeet Kune Do: <https://books.google.com/books?id=bUjUBQAAQBAJ&pg=PA21&lpg=PA21&dq=It+is+a+state+of+complete+emptiness.+Concentration+is+a+form+of+exclusion+and+where+there+is+exclusion,+there+is+a+thinker+who+excludes&source=bl&ots=3caZMrY584&sig=nGOpku4y>

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Sifu Yip Man story: <http://www.blackbeltmag.com/daily/traditional-martial-arts-training/wing-chun/yip-man-wing-chun-legend-and-bruce-lees-formal-teacher/>

Quote from The Bruce Lee Story: https://books.google.com/books?id=2NAuMRjSUSIC&pg=PA39&lpg=PA39&dq=the+very+basic+stuff,+the+essence+of+gung+fu?+Didn%E2%80%99t+the+common+water+illustrate+to+me+the+principle+of+gung+fu?&source=bl&ots=diD8UQ3yBq&sig=b1_t7A6FWQcgeKU1kDP6LjsHsLo&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjm6NOxuvjKAhUS3WMKHRXeC7EQ6AEIJDAB#v=onepage&q=the%20very%20basic%20stuff%2C%20the%20essence%20of%20gung%20fu%3F%20Didn%E2%80%99t%20the%20common%20water%20illustrate%20to%20me%20the%20principle%20of%20gung%20fu%3F&f=false

A little Wing Chun info: <http://kungfuwingchun.com/wing-chun-los-angeles/>