

# MARTIAL ARTS

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*A Way of Life*



RODNEY KING PhD

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# **MARTIAL ARTs:**

## **A WAY OF LIFE**

**By Rodney King, PhD**

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The path should not have a paywall. Neither should the ideas that defend it.

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## A NOTE ON THIS BOOK

This book is free. That is a deliberate choice.

I wrote it because I believe the ideas in these pages need to reach the people who are ready for them, and I did not want price to be the thing that stands between this work and the person who needs it.

The martial arts world is saturated with products. This is not one of them.

If you are a practitioner who has felt the hollowness, who suspects the path has more to offer than what the dominant culture has made of it, who wants martial arts to be a practice of genuine transformation rather than another arena for performance and proving, then this book was written for you. Take it. Read it. Pass it on to someone who needs it.

If the work speaks to you and you are in a position to support it, donations are welcome and deeply appreciated. They allow me to continue writing, teaching, and building the kind of martial arts culture this book argues for. But there is no obligation. The ideas matter more than the transaction.

The path should not have a paywall.



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# Preface

This is not a technique book.

If you have picked it up expecting breakdowns of combinations, guard passes, training programmes, or the kind of tactical content that fills most martial arts publishing, you will be disappointed. There is nothing wrong with those books. I have learned from many of them. But this is not one of them.

What this book is, as honestly as I can describe it, is a philosophical argument about what martial arts was meant to be, what it has become, and what it might still become if enough people care to fight for it. Not fight in the physical sense. Fight in the deeper sense. Fight against the forces that have turned one of the oldest and most profound paths of human development into a spectacle, a commodity, and a machine for producing externally impressive but inwardly unfinished human beings.

I have been writing this book for the better part of a decade without knowing I was writing it. It began as notes, scribbled in airports and hotel rooms and on long flights between coaching engagements, as I travelled the world teaching modern martial arts. I was watching the culture up close, from the inside, and something kept troubling me that I could not quite name. A thinness. A disconnect between what the practice was supposed to be doing for people and what it was actually doing to them. Between the language of transformation that everyone used and the reality of what was being produced. I kept writing because I could not stop noticing, and I could not stop noticing because the gap between the promise and the reality kept getting wider.

Those notes became reflections. The reflections became arguments. The arguments became the chapters that follow. What you are holding is not a book that was planned

from the beginning as a neat thesis. It is a book that was lived into existence over years of questioning, failing, rebuilding, and refusing to look away from what I was seeing.

I should be honest about something else, because without it this book would be incomplete and, worse, dishonest.

Much of what I critique in these pages, I have done. The worship of toughness. The confusion of hardness with wholeness. The reduction of the path to proving. The hollow victories. The identity built on being the martial tough guy. The inability to separate who I was from what I could do on the mat. And beneath all of it, running silently through decades of training like a current I refused to acknowledge, the unmetabolised trauma of a childhood that had taught me violence was the only language the world respected. That trauma did not stay in Johannesburg. It followed me onto every mat, into every round, into every relationship with every student I ever coached. It shaped what I valued, what I rewarded, and what I was blind to. I did not see it clearly for a very long time, because the modern MARTIAL arts world I inhabited never asked me to.

As such, I am not writing from above the problems I describe. I am writing from inside them. I inflicted many of them on myself, and in some cases on the people I was supposed to be guiding. If I am hard on modern martial arts culture in this book, it is because I have been a willing participant in the very things I now question. We do not critique what we have never loved. We do not see the cracks in something we have not given our whole life to.

Then my body made the argument for me, in a language I could not ignore.

After decades of hard training, hard fighting, hard living on the mat and off it, the bill was due. Severe cervical degeneration. Symptoms that looked and felt like CTE, the kind of neurological damage that accumulates silently over years of impact and then announces itself all at once. Chronic fatigue that turned ordinary days into endurance tests. I was told to stop training. To stop martial arts. To stop the one thing that had been the organising centre of my entire life since I was six years old.

I cannot adequately describe what that felt like.

Devastation is too clean a word. It was more like having the ground pulled out from underneath everything I had built, everything I believed about myself, everything I used to answer the question of who I was. And in that collapse, the ideas in this book stopped being intellectual arguments and became survival questions. If I could never fight again, never spar again, never train in the old way again, did the path still have meaning? Was there something in martial arts that went deeper than what my body could do? Or had the whole thing been, as I secretly feared, just another elaborate way of proving I was somebody?

Those questions nearly broke me. They also saved me. Because they forced me to find the answer that this book is trying to offer.

I have since returned to martial arts, but differently. Slower. More honestly. Less interested in what I can impose and more interested in what the path is still capable of teaching me now that the old armour has been stripped away. Much of what follows in these pages was forged in that return, in the painful and sometimes humbling process of discovering that the art I thought I knew had dimensions I had never been forced to explore while my body was still willing to carry me through on toughness alone.

This book is written for the person who suspects, perhaps quietly, perhaps in the hours after training when the endorphins have faded, and the silence returns, that there must be more to this than what the culture is offering. The person who has felt the hollow victory and wondered what it means. The person who loves the path but senses that the path, as currently configured, is not asking enough of them. The person who wants martial arts to be a practice of genuine transformation and not merely another arena for the performance of worth.

If that is you, then this book is for you.

I wrote it because the boy who walked into that dojo in Johannesburg forty-seven years ago deserved a path that would make him not just dangerous but free. Not just tough but whole. Not just skilled but wise enough to know what skill is for. I do not think he always got that path. I think for long stretches he got something smaller, something the culture had already diminished before it reached him, and something he diminished further by bringing to it only the hunger to prove rather than the willingness to be changed.

I wrote this book to argue that the larger path still exists. That it has always existed. And that it is waiting for anyone willing to train not merely with intensity but with intention.

The mat is still there. The question is whether you will step onto it as a consumer or as an artist. As a performer or as a practitioner. As someone looking for the next external validation or as someone willing to let the practice reach all the way down to the foundations of who you are.

That choice is yours.

Let us begin.

# Chapter 1: Survival Is Not the Same as Freedom

I did not enter martial arts because I wanted a hobby. I entered because I needed a way to survive.

People often romanticise the beginnings of a martial path. They talk about discipline, tradition, philosophy, and self-mastery, as though the road always begins in wisdom. Sometimes it does not. Sometimes it begins in fear. Sometimes it begins because the world has already made itself felt as dangerous, and a child realises, long before he has the language for it, that softness alone will not be enough. That was closer to the truth for me. I was not looking for inner peace at six years old. I was looking for a way to avoid being preyed upon.

I grew up in government housing on the South Side of Johannesburg. That fact is not incidental. Place forms you. It teaches your nervous system what to expect from the world long before your intellect catches up. It teaches you, often before thought, whether life is basically safe or whether it must be navigated with your guard already half-raised. Where I grew up, violence was not abstract. It was ambient. It was in the gangs, in the daily intimidation, in the humiliations that waited for anyone who could not push back, in the hard social arithmetic that governs places where no one believes help is coming. Home did not protect me from that atmosphere either. My mother's alcoholism and the chaos that trailed it meant that even the place that should have offered shelter carried its own instability. Fear moved between rooms. It changed shape, but it never fully disappeared.

Philosophers have their language for this. Heidegger called it *Geworfenheit*, thrownness: the condition of finding yourself already inside a situation you did not choose, a world that was not arranged for your benefit. You do not get to pick the opening conditions of your life. You are thrown into them, and then the question becomes what you will do with what has been handed to you. I did not read Heidegger as a child, but I did live him. Every kid in those flats did. We were thrown into a world that had already decided, in most of the ways that mattered, what our lives would look like. The gangs, the poverty, the ambient menace of a society still tearing itself apart under apartheid and its long aftermath: these were not obstacles we had chosen to overcome for the sake of building character. They were the water we swam in. Character, if it came at all, was a byproduct of not drowning.

When people speak casually now about martial arts building confidence, they usually mean something clean and developmental. They mean a child learns some skills, stands a little straighter, and becomes more self-assured. I do not dismiss that. It happens. But there is another entry point into this practice that is less photogenic and more honest. Some children are not stepping onto the mat because they need enrichment. They are stepping onto it because something in them already knows they are outmatched by the world around them, and that if they do not learn how to meet force, force will keep deciding who they are. They come not for growth but for survival, and only later, if they are fortunate and if the practice is deep enough, do they discover that it had more to offer than they originally needed.

That was my reality. And I suspect it is closer to the original impulse behind all martial arts than the sanitised origin stories we tell today. Go far enough back and every fighting system on this planet was born from necessity, from the raw fact that human beings have always lived in proximity to violence and have always needed

ways to endure it. The earliest martial traditions were not designed for tournament brackets or Instagram highlight reels. They emerged from communities who understood that the capacity to protect yourself and those you loved was not optional. It was the baseline condition of a dignified life.

Pierre Hadot, the French philosopher who spent decades recovering the lost meaning of ancient philosophy, argued that the schools of antiquity, the Stoics, the Epicureans, the Cynics, never understood philosophy as abstract theory. For them, philosophy was a way of life. It was a set of practices, exercises, disciplines through which a human being transformed themselves. Not just their thinking, but their entire orientation to existence. The point was not to know the good but to become good, not to theorise about courage but to embody it, not to write about tranquillity but to practise it under conditions that made tranquillity difficult. When I read Hadot for the first time, years into my own journey, I felt something click into place. What he was describing was what martial arts, at its deepest, had always been. Not a sport. Not a spectacle. Not a self-improvement hack dressed up in a gi. A practice of transformation. A discipline through which a person could become something other than what the world was trying to make them.

But I am getting ahead of myself.

Before philosophy, before reflection, before any of that, there was a boy watching movies.

I remember visiting my uncle's apartment in the heart of Johannesburg, where we would watch old martial arts films on a battered reel projector. Those films captivated me in a way I could not explain at the time. Not just because of the fighting, though the fighting was extraordinary. What held me was the story underneath the action. The hero was always someone who had been beaten down. He was poor, outmatched,

humiliated. The world was stacked against him. Power belonged to the corrupt, to the cruel, to those who enforced the rules of an unjust order. And then, through discipline, through suffering, through a training that clearly cost him everything, the hero transformed. He did not simply become more dangerous. He became something else entirely. He became free.

What I was watching, though I had no framework for it then, was some cinematic rendering of what Joseph Campbell called the hero's journey: the descent into the underworld, the ordeal, the death of the old self, and the return as someone fundamentally changed. But there was something in those films that went beyond even Campbell's archetype. The martial artist in those stories was not just a hero. He was a renegade. He stood outside the established order. He refused to submit to the corrupt structures around him, not because he had a political programme, but because something in his training had awakened a sense of what was right that could not be bought, threatened, or negotiated away. He had become, through his practice, a person who no longer fit inside the machinery of conformity.

Albert Camus, writing in the middle of the twentieth century, described the rebel as someone who says no. Not the revolutionary, who has a blueprint for a new society. The rebel. The one who draws a line. The one who, confronted with a world that demands his complicity in its ugliness, refuses. Camus understood that this refusal was not primarily political; it was existential. It was the assertion of a dignity that the world had not authorised, a declaration that there existed within the human being something that could not be colonised by power, by fear, or by the endless pressure to conform. When I think about those old kung fu heroes now, through the lens of decades of training and years of philosophical study, I recognise them as Camus's

rebels. They were men who had found, through martial discipline, a ground on which to stand that did not depend on the approval of the world that had tried to crush them.

That distinction matters immensely, because it names the tension that has lived in my own martial life from the very beginning. On one side stood the urgent, practical, completely understandable need to become capable. To learn to fight. To develop the skills that would stop me from being a target. I make no apology for that need. It was real, it was legitimate, and I have spent decades refining the tools that serve it. On the other side stood a deeper intuition, one I could not have articulated as a child but which never fully left me, that this path pointed toward something larger than physical capability. That martial practice, if you followed it honestly and refused to reduce it to mere technique, could alter not only what you were able to do but what kind of person you might become.

Here is where I must be direct, because this is where the argument of this book begins in earnest.

Modern martial arts, as it exists in most of its visible expressions today, has almost entirely abandoned the second half of that equation. What remains is capability without transformation. Technique without depth. Fighting without becoming. The modern martial arts landscape, dominated as it is by combat sports, social media spectacle, and an entrepreneurial culture that treats every gym as a franchise opportunity, has produced something historically unprecedented: a global community of people who train in disciplines that were once vehicles for the deepest kind of human development, and who use them almost exclusively for competition, content, and commerce.

I am not saying this to be provocative for its own sake. I am saying it because I have lived inside this world for over three decades, and the pattern has become impossible

to ignore. The combat sports model, for all its technical sophistication, has effectively industrialised martial arts. It has turned practices that once cultivated wisdom, restraint, and self-knowledge into a production line for athletes, influencers, and brand ambassadors. The values it celebrates are the values of the marketplace: dominance, accumulation, visibility, status. Win the fight. Get the belt. Build the following. Monetise the brand. Rinse and repeat. And we are told that this is what it means to be a martial artist in the twenty-first century.

*I reject that narrative entirely.*

Not because competition is inherently wrong. It is not. Not because physical skill does not matter. It does, profoundly. Not because self-preservation skills are unimportant. For many people, as it was for me, it is the difference between dignity and degradation. But because reducing martial arts to these dimensions alone is like reducing painting to the ability to mix colours, or reducing music to the capacity to play scales. You have preserved the technical infrastructure and gutted the soul.

Byung-Chul Han, the Korean-born philosopher writing from Berlin, has described our current era as the "burnout society," a world in which the relentless demand for performance, productivity, and self-optimisation has produced not liberation but exhaustion. We are not oppressed by an external tyrant, Han argues. We are oppressed by ourselves, by the internalised imperative to achieve, to compete, to constantly prove our worth through visible accomplishment. What struck me when I first encountered Han's work was how precisely it described the culture of modern martial arts. The obsession with competition results. The endless pursuit of the next belt, the next title, the next viral moment. The anxiety of falling behind. The inability to train without measuring, comparing, and performing. This is not the martial path. This is the achievement treadmill wearing a mouthguard.

Nietzsche, writing more than a century before Han, saw something similar. He warned that modern culture would produce what he called the "last man," a figure so thoroughly domesticated by comfort, conformity, and the avoidance of risk that he would be incapable of genuine creation, genuine struggle, or genuine meaning. The last man does not rebel. He does not question. He optimises. He finds the most efficient path to the most socially validated outcome and calls it success. When I look at the dominant culture of modern martial arts, I see Nietzsche's last man everywhere. I see practitioners who have perfected their technique but never once asked themselves what their training is for beyond the next competition. I see coaches who can break down a fight with surgical precision but who have never considered what kind of human being their methodology is producing. I see an entire industry that has mistaken technical excellence for wisdom, and status for depth.

The martial artist I am describing in this book, the one this book is calling you to become, stands against all of that.

Not because he is anti-technique. He is deeply committed to functional skill. Not because he opposes hard training. He trains with an intensity that most recreational practitioners would find uncomfortable. Not because he rejects the physical. The body is the ground of this practice, and he respects it absolutely. But because he understands, as the oldest martial traditions always understood, that technique is a means, not an end. That the body is a vehicle, not a destination. That the real work of martial arts is not winning fights but forging a self that is capable of living with authenticity, courage, and depth in a world that is constantly trying to flatten you into something manageable.

Aristotle had a word for this. He called it arete, and it is one of the most misunderstood concepts in Western philosophy. Arete is typically translated as

"excellence" or "virtue," but neither word captures what Aristotle actually meant. Arete is not about being the best in comparison to others. It is not a ranking. It is not a podium. It is the fullest expression of what a thing is capable of becoming. A knife that cuts cleanly has the arete of a knife. A horse that runs with full power and grace has the arete of a horse. And a human being who lives with courage, practical wisdom, justice, and temperance, who acts from a settled character rather than from impulse, fear, or the desperate need for approval, has the arete of a human being. Arete is not something you win. It is something you become, slowly, through sustained practice, through the willingness to be shaped by difficulty, through a lifelong refusal to settle for less than what you are capable of.

This is what martial arts was supposed to be. Not a competition to determine who is most dominant. Not a pipeline for producing athletes. Not content for consumption. A practice of arete. A discipline through which human beings cultivated the qualities that allowed them to live well, not by the world's definition of well, but by a standard that arose from something deeper than social approval.

I want you to sit with that for a moment. Because if I am right, then most of what passes for martial arts today is not merely incomplete. It is a betrayal of the tradition it claims to represent. It has taken a practice that was designed to produce free, self-possessed, morally serious human beings and turned it into a machine for producing competitors, consumers, and conformists. It has kept the martial and discarded the art. And it has done this so thoroughly, so pervasively, that most practitioners do not even notice what has been lost.

Michel Foucault spent much of his later career studying what he called "technologies of the self," the practices through which human beings in different historical periods shaped, examined, and transformed themselves. He was fascinated by the ancient

Greeks and Romans, who understood self-formation as one of the central tasks of a meaningful life. To care for yourself, in the ancient sense, was not self-indulgence. It was a discipline, a set of rigorous practices, including physical training, reflection, journalling, dialogue, and the cultivation of specific virtues, through which a person gradually became the author of their own existence rather than a product of social conditioning. Foucault saw these practices disappearing from modern life, replaced by institutions and systems that shaped people from the outside: schools, workplaces, media, markets. We became, in his analysis, subjects who were formed by power rather than persons who formed themselves.

When I consider the trajectory of my own martial life, I recognise both possibilities. For years, I was formed by forces I did not choose and did not fully understand. The violence of my environment shaped me into a fighter. The combat culture I entered shaped me into someone who measured his worth by his capacity for dominance. The martial arts industry shaped me into a coach who taught what the market demanded. Each of these forces acted on me from the outside, and for a long time, I mistook their pressure for my own will. I thought I was choosing this path. In reality, the path had been chosen for me by the conditions of my life, and I was simply following the grooves that had already been cut.

The shift, when it came, was not dramatic. There was no single moment of enlightenment, no blinding revelation on the mat. It was more like a slow tide going out, revealing ground that had been there all along but hidden beneath the water. I began to feel a hollowness in what I was doing. I had won all the physical battles I needed to win. I had built a reputation. I had won more rounds, against more formidable opponents, across more decades than most practitioners will ever see. And yet, outside of training, I found myself restless, unsettled, haunted by a question I

could not quite articulate. Was I free? Or had I simply become very skilled at surviving?

There is a difference, and it is everything.

Survival is reactive. It answers to threat. It develops the capacities needed to endure hostile conditions, and it can produce remarkable toughness, resilience, and adaptability. I do not underestimate survival. It kept me alive. But survival alone does not produce a life worth living. It produces a life organised around avoidance: avoiding danger, avoiding weakness, avoiding the vulnerability that comes with genuine openness to the world. A life lived purely in survival mode is a defended life, a fortress life, and eventually, no matter how strong the walls, the person inside begins to wonder what the fortress is actually protecting.

Freedom is something else entirely. Freedom, in the sense I mean it here, is not the absence of constraint. It is the presence of self-authorship. It is the capacity to act from within rather than merely react to what comes from without. It is what Kierkegaard was pointing toward when he wrote that the self is not something given but something that must be chosen, again and again, in the face of everything that tempts you to become merely what the world expects. Freedom is not a destination. It is a practice, a daily commitment to living from your own centre rather than from the pressures, expectations, and ready-made scripts that the world is always trying to hand you.

And this is precisely where martial arts, practised as an art, becomes something that no other discipline quite replicates. Because in martial training, you do not encounter freedom as a concept. You encounter it as a physical reality. Every time you step onto the mat, you face a set of conditions you did not choose, an opponent's pressure, an unexpected angle of attack, a moment of confusion or pain, and you must respond. In

that moment, the question is always the same: will you react from conditioning, from the automatic patterns that have been drilled into you by fear, habit, and social expectation? Or will you respond from a deeper place, from a self that has been deliberately cultivated through practice, a self that is able to remain present, composed, and intelligent even when the pressure is real?

That is the training ground for freedom. Not freedom as abstraction. Freedom as embodied reality. Freedom as something you practice with your body, your breath, your nervous system, and your will, under conditions that make freedom genuinely difficult.

This is what the old kung fu films were showing me, though I could not have said it then. The hero did not simply learn to fight. He learned to remain himself under pressure. He learned to act from principle rather than from fear. He learned to stand outside the corrupt order of his world, not because he had read a manifesto, but because his training had shaped him into someone who could no longer be bent to the will of others. His body had become the site of his liberation.

That is the vision at the heart of this book. Not martial arts as sport. Not martial arts as self-preservation. Not martial arts as content, commodity, or career. Martial arts as a practice of becoming free. Martial arts as the discipline through which a human being refuses to be determined by the forces that press in from all sides, the violence of circumstance, the seductions of status, the dead weight of conformity, and instead creates, through sustained and honest practice, a self that belongs to no one but themselves.

I began with survival. Most of us do, in one form or another. Even those who come to martial arts from comfortable backgrounds are often fleeing something: anxiety, weakness, a sense of inadequacy, the nagging suspicion that they are not fully alive.

These are all forms of survival, responses to a world that threatens us in different ways depending on our circumstances but threatens us all the same.

The question is whether we stay there.

The question is whether our training will only ever be a more sophisticated form of defence, or whether it will become the ground on which we build something genuinely new. Not a harder shell. A deeper self.

That is where the chapter must end, because that is where the real journey begins. Not with the boy who only wanted to stop being afraid, though he is part of this story. Not with the fighter who learned what worked under pressure, though he is part of this story too. But with the man who realises, after decades on the mat, that survival is not the same as freedom, that fighting is not the same as becoming, and that the true martial path only opens when you stop asking how to win and start asking what kind of soul your training is forming.

# Chapter 2: The Hollow Victory

There comes a point in some martial lives when the thing you worked so hard to become stops feeling like an answer.

From the outside, nothing may look wrong. You are training. You are improving. You are respected. You know things now that once seemed mysterious. You can handle yourself. You have rounds behind you, experience behind you, and the quiet authority that comes from having paid for your knowledge in sweat, fear, bruises, and consequence. In some cases, you have belts, titles, medals, students, or a name that means something in your circles. The external story makes sense. It gives the experience shape, and it can be told with confidence. If someone looked in from the outside, they might say you have done it. You became the thing you set out to become.

And yet, somewhere underneath all that, another feeling starts to rise. Not dramatic despair, not necessarily. Often it is subtler than that. A thinness. A private anticlimax. A strange sense that what once felt full of meaning has somehow become too small to hold the life that has grown around it. You win the round and feel less than you expected. You dominate the exchange and discover that control is not the same thing as satisfaction. You achieve what used to matter enormously and find, not joy, but a kind of silence.

That silence matters. I know it because I have lived it.

Blaise Pascal, writing in the seventeenth century, observed that nearly all of human unhappiness arises from one thing: our inability to sit quietly in a room. He saw that most of what we call ambition, entertainment, busyness, and striving is really a form of diversion, an elaborate strategy for avoiding the confrontation with ourselves that

silence makes unavoidable. Pascal understood that people do not chase pleasures and victories primarily because those things are satisfying. They chase them because the activity of chasing keeps a more disturbing question at bay. Stop moving, stop proving, stop accumulating for even a moment, and the question surfaces: what is all this actually for?

I did not read Pascal during the years when my martial life was organised around proving. I did not need to. I was too busy moving. But when I look back on the way I trained, the way I taught, the way I structured my entire identity around being the person who had fought, survived, and could still handle whatever came, I recognise Pascal's diversion with uncomfortable clarity. The relentless activity was not only productive. It was protective. As long as I was sharpening, competing, preparing, coaching, and building, I did not have to sit with the silence underneath. I did not have to ask whether the life I had constructed around combat effectiveness was actually a life that could sustain a human being, or merely a very convincing performance of one.

There were years in which the practical side of martial arts carried enormous weight for me, for obvious reasons. Fighting mattered to my survival, so effectiveness mattered. In certain seasons of my life, it mattered a great deal to know what held up under pressure and what fell apart. I had no patience for fantasy, and life had given me very little reason to romanticise incompetence. In the military, on the doors of Johannesburg's most notorious nightclubs through the nineties, in the harder places where violence did not come dressed as performance but as consequence, one learns quickly that wishful thinking is a liability. A lot of martial arts falls apart there. A lot of posturing falls apart there. A lot of people discover, too late, that they have been

sold an image rather than a skill. I built my life in large part by refusing that illusion. I wanted what was real. I wanted what worked.

That seriousness gave me much. It also eventually carried me to a place I did not expect. It carried me straight into the emptiness on the other side of visible competence.

I remember one moment in particular because it gathered something that had been building quietly for years. I had just come through an intense sparring session. Technically, I had done everything right. I had been sharp, tactically sound, controlled, dominant. The sort of session that, in the old framework, should have left me satisfied. Instead, I felt nothing. Not peace, not joy, not even the usual post-training tiredness that can at least feel honest. Just a hollowness, a peculiar silence where the reward was supposed to be. It was one of those moments that strips away self-deception because the result you were once sure would feed you no longer does. I had what should have counted as success, and inside it, there was nothing that could answer the deeper hunger.

That night I found myself reading Marcus Aurelius, the Roman Emperor who spent more time wrestling with his own soul than with the enemies of Rome. One passage stopped me: "At dawn, when you have trouble getting out of bed, tell yourself: I have to go to work, as a human being." As a human being. Not as a fighter. Not as a champion. Not as someone who needs to dominate the next exchange. As a human being. And I realised, sitting with that line and the emptiness of the day still fresh, that I had spent decades training to become harder, more effective, more formidable, and had somewhere along the way forgotten to ask whether I was also becoming more whole.

That was the beginning of a very uncomfortable honesty. I started to suspect that I was using martial arts not only to sharpen myself, but to keep outrunning questions I did not want to face.

Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher who understood the interior life of the striver better than almost anyone, described a condition he called "the sickness unto death." It is not physical illness. It is despair, but not the kind most people recognise. Kierkegaard's most penetrating insight was that the deepest form of despair is the one that does not know it is despair. It is the despair of the person who is busy, accomplished, admired, and functional, who has arranged their life so successfully around external markers of worth that they never notice they have lost contact with themselves. They are in despair precisely because they do not feel desperate. Everything looks fine. The machinery runs smoothly. The accolades accumulate. And underneath it all, the self, the actual self, the one that cannot be measured by victories or validated by applause, slowly starves.

When I first encountered Kierkegaard's analysis, I felt it land somewhere deeper than the intellect. He was not describing some abstract philosophical condition. He was describing what I had lived. He was describing what I had watched dozens of martial artists live without ever finding the words for it. The champion who cannot stop competing even when competition no longer gives him anything but anxiety. The coach who measures his worth entirely by the success of his fighters and feels annihilated when they lose. The black belt who has spent twenty years on the mat and still cannot sit in a room without the need to be recognised as someone important. These are not failures of discipline. They are symptoms of a despair so well disguised by achievement that the person suffering it believes they are thriving.

That, to me, is the hollow victory in its most complete and most dangerous form.

It is not simply losing interest. It is not burnout in the ordinary sense. It is the dawning recognition that a life built around proving can only carry you so far before you have to ask what all the proving was actually for. And martial arts, perhaps because it traffics so heavily in visible markers of progress, is especially vulnerable to this crisis. There is always another measure ready to stand in for meaning. Another belt, another title, another win, another sharper technique, another seminar, another student looking at you as though you possess something hard-earned that they wish they knew. None of this is meaningless in itself. I am not dismissing the value of achievement, lineage, growth, or tested skill. But once those things begin carrying the burden of existential worth, once they become the evidence you are assembling in the case for your own right to exist, they start hollowing out from the inside. They can no longer remain what they are. They become currency in a transaction that can never close.

That is too much weight for any external success to bear honestly.

Aristotle understood this more than two thousand years ago, though modern culture has done its best to forget what he actually said. Most people, if they know anything about Aristotle's ethics, know the word *eudaimonia*, typically translated as "happiness" but meaning something closer to "human flourishing," the condition of a life lived well and lived fully. What is less well known is how carefully Aristotle distinguished *eudaimonia* from the things most people chase in its name. He was explicit: wealth is not *eudaimonia*. Fame is not *eudaimonia*. Pleasure is not *eudaimonia*. Even honour, which was the most prized external good in Athenian culture, is not *eudaimonia*, because honour depends on the judgment of others, and anything that depends on the judgment of others can be given and taken away by forces entirely outside your control. *Eudaimonia*, for Aristotle, had to be rooted in

something more stable than public opinion. It had to arise from the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue, which is to say, from the ongoing practice of living well, choosing well, and becoming the kind of person whose character could be relied upon regardless of whether anyone was watching.

Read that slowly and then look at what modern martial arts culture actually celebrates. It celebrates precisely the things Aristotle warned against mistaking for the good life. Titles. Rankings. Public recognition. The visible defeat of opponents. The accumulation of credentials. The applause of the crowd. It has built an entire economy of meaning around external goods and then wonders why so many of its most accomplished practitioners feel hollow. Aristotle would not have wondered. He would have predicted it.

The modern world is terrible at recognising this because it worships winning so thoroughly. It treats victory not merely as outcome but as revelation. The winner must have done something right. The winner must possess something deeper. The winner must, in some way, be more. Martial arts mirrors this cultural sickness with remarkable precision. It tells people, often without quite saying it, that to win in the ring or on the mat is to validate yourself more broadly. The language around it is familiar by now: discipline, grit, mental toughness, champion mindset, resilience, self-worth. Build confidence through competition. Prove yourself. Test yourself. Become harder. Become better. There is truth in pieces of this, enough truth to make it dangerous. Competition can reveal. Pressure can clarify. But once external victory becomes the primary moral language of a practice, the deeper layers begin to die off. Training becomes less about transformation and more about rank inside a system of visibility and validation. The accolades remain on the wall, but the soul begins to leave the room.

Byung-Chul Han describes the contemporary world as an "achievement society," a culture that has replaced external coercion with something far more insidious: the internalised compulsion to perform. We are no longer disciplined from the outside by masters, bosses, and tyrants in the old sense. We discipline ourselves, relentlessly, voluntarily, and we call it freedom. The entrepreneur who works eighteen-hour days calls it passion. The athlete who trains through injury calls it dedication. The martial artist who cannot take a week off without feeling worthless calls it commitment. Han's point is that this self-exploitation is more effective than any external oppression precisely because the person suffering it believes they are choosing it. The prison has been moved inside, and the prisoner has been handed the keys and told they are free.

I have seen this dynamic play out across martial arts culture with devastating consistency. The practitioner who cannot rest because rest feels like regression. The competitor who wins and immediately begins worrying about the next fight. The coach who builds his entire identity around being the toughest person in the room and privately cannot tolerate a single moment of vulnerability. These people are not free. They are trapped inside an achievement loop that martial arts culture not only fails to challenge but actively reinforces. Every belt, every title, every public recognition becomes another bar in the cage, not because those things are inherently wrong, but because they have been loaded with a weight they were never designed to carry: the weight of proving that you are enough.

I have seen too many men live inside that trap. And I must be honest: I lived inside it myself.

I have seen world champions who could handle an opponent more gracefully than they could handle a conversation. I have seen undefeated fighters unravel under the ordinary pressures of life, not because they lacked courage, but because their entire

philosophy had narrowed into dominance, performance, and the need to remain visibly in control. I have watched talented martial artists burn out, not from simple overtraining, but from a deeper meaninglessness, the gnawing sense that after all the rounds and all the hard-won skill, they still could not answer the more human question of what it all added up to. This is not because they were weak. It is because they had inherited an unconscious philosophy that confused surviving with thriving, being dangerous with being whole, and visible mastery with an actually inhabited life.

That unconscious philosophy is more widespread than most martial artists are willing to admit.

Heidegger had a term for this kind of unreflective existence. He called it living under the rule of das Man, "the They." Das Man is not a specific person or group. It is the anonymous force of convention, the way things are done, the unexamined assumptions that a culture transmits to its members without anyone needing to articulate them. Under the rule of das Man, a person does not choose their values. They absorb them. They do not decide what matters. They inherit a prefabricated answer and mistake it for their own conviction. Heidegger's insight was that most people, most of the time, are not actually living their own lives. They are living the life that has been prescribed for them by the culture they happen to inhabit, and the deepest tragedy is that they do not notice. They feel as though they are choosing. In reality, they are conforming.

Every time someone steps onto the mat, they are already carrying a set of beliefs about what the practice is for. They may never have spoken those beliefs aloud. They may never have examined them. But they are there, operating silently in the background, shaping everything: the way the person trains, the way they handle

defeat, the way they look at training partners, the way they relate to hierarchy, vulnerability, intensity, and fear. For many practitioners, the philosophy running underneath the whole enterprise sounds something like this: I must be tougher than the people around me. Winning validates my worth. Vulnerability is weakness. The world is full of threats, and I must be ready. That philosophy, absorbed from the culture of modern martial arts without ever being scrutinised, will indeed make a person formidable in certain contexts. It may also make them miserable everywhere else.

I know this because I lived some version of it for decades.

It gave me an edge. It gave me seriousness. It gave me the ability to endure and keep going when softer approaches would have failed. But it also narrowed the whole field of life into a single register. Every problem started looking like a fight. Every disagreement carried a charge beyond what the situation actually required. The nervous system remained primed for conflict long after the external conditions no longer demanded that level of readiness. I remember one incident that crystallised it: what should have been a minor professional disagreement became, in my hands, an exercise in domination. I brought to a conversation the same intensity I would have brought to a physical confrontation. Tense body language. Aggressive verbal patterns. An overwhelming need to win the exchange. No punches were thrown, but the approach was a fighter's approach. The relationship was damaged beyond repair. That was the hidden cost of a combat-only philosophy. It had made me effective in confrontation but left too little room for connection, for understanding, for tenderness, or for any meaningful relationship to vulnerability. I had become precisely what my training had conditioned me to be: someone prepared for battle but poorly equipped for peace.

Jean-Paul Sartre described a concept he called *mauvaise foi*, bad faith: the condition of a person who deceives themselves about their own freedom by pretending that their choices are determined by circumstances, roles, or identities rather than by their own agency. The waiter who performs the role of waiter so completely that he forgets he is a free human being who happens to be waiting tables. The soldier who loses himself so entirely in the role of soldier that he can no longer think outside it. Bad faith is not lying to others. It is lying to yourself about what you are, and specifically about the fact that you are always more than any role, any title, any identity that the world has given you.

I think much of what passes for martial arts identity is a form of bad faith. The fighter who cannot separate his sense of self from his record. The coach who has so completely merged with the role of authority figure that he cannot be questioned without feeling existentially threatened. The black belt who would rather maintain a fiction of invulnerability than admit to the ordinary human struggle underneath the rank. These are not signs of strength. They are signs that a person has mistaken a role for a self, and in doing so, has surrendered the very freedom that martial arts was supposed to cultivate.

This is what the hollow victory reveals if a person is honest enough to stay with it. It reveals that competence is not the same thing as integration. It reveals that hard rounds do not automatically deepen a person. It reveals that one can build a whole identity around martial success and still find oneself inwardly scattered, spiritually underfed, relationally brittle, and quietly ruled by the same fear one thought the training had defeated.

The irony is painful, and in my experience, most people simply do not want to hear it.

Many people enter martial arts because they want to become free from something. Fear, humiliation, chaos, confusion, weakness, powerlessness. That is real, and I honour it because it was my own entry point. But if the path remains unconscious, if no one ever stops to examine the philosophy driving the whole enterprise, people often end up merely changing the costume of the original wound. Instead of honouring the humanness of their insecurities, they become privately enslaved to proving. Instead of being honest about their fear, they become addicted to hardness. Instead of acknowledging their uncertainty, they build themselves up as visible experts and still cannot rest. The cage gets stronger and begins to look impressive from the outside.

Nietzsche saw this with terrifying clarity. He understood that what most people call strength is often a reaction against weakness rather than a genuine overcoming of it. The man who becomes obsessed with dominance is not demonstrating power in the way Nietzsche meant it. He is demonstrating that he is still controlled by the thing he fears, still defined by the wound, still dancing to someone else's music even as he believes he has written his own. Nietzsche's vision of genuine strength, what he called the capacity for self-overcoming, had nothing to do with defeating external opponents. It had to do with the willingness to face the deepest and most uncomfortable truths about oneself and to keep going. It had to do with the refusal to hide behind a persona, a title, or a display of force. It had to do with the courage to become, not what the world expected or rewarded, but what one's own honest examination of life demanded.

This is why the hollow victory is so important. It is one of the few moments when the whole arrangement can begin to crack.

If you are fortunate and perhaps honest enough, there will come a moment when what used to satisfy no longer does. The applause fades too quickly. The belt does not carry what you thought it would. The domination of an exchange produces not fullness but a strange silence. You find yourself asking questions that no amount of technical knowledge can answer. If I could never fight again, would this still mean something? If the trophies vanished, what would remain? If I stripped away competition, proving, fear, rank, and the carefully constructed image of myself as the martial guy, what exactly would I still be left with?

That silence after the question tells you almost everything.

I have asked martial artists some version of it for years, and the pause that follows is always revealing. If you could never spar again, never compete again, never fight again, never prove your ability in the old ways, would your training still have meaning? Many people do not know how to answer because nobody ever invited them to ask the question in the first place. They inherited a philosophy without examining it. They trained inside a culture of external achievement and took that culture for the path itself. They were, in Heidegger's terms, living under the rule of *das Man*, doing what one does, pursuing what one pursues, measuring themselves by the metrics that everyone around them treated as self-evident. Then one day, they discover that external achievement keeps you moving, but it does not save you.

Leo Tolstoy, at the height of his fame and artistic power, experienced exactly this crisis. He described it in his *Confession*: a man who had achieved everything the world told him to want, literary greatness, wealth, family, recognition, and who found himself standing at the edge of a void, unable to understand why none of it answered the question of what life was for. Tolstoy's crisis was not a failure of talent or effort. It was the inevitable result of having pursued the world's definition of success with total

commitment and having arrived at the destination only to discover that no one was home. The external architecture was magnificent. The interior was empty.

I recount Tolstoy not because my situation was comparable in scale, but because the structure of the crisis is identical. It is the crisis that comes when a person has optimised for the wrong variable. When they have mistaken the instrument for the end. When they have confused being impressive with being alive.

This is where I think modern martial arts most desperately needs a philosophical revolution. Not because philosophy is decorative, and not because martial artists need to become armchair intellectuals quoting Stoics online while training lightly twice a week. That is not what I mean. I mean something much more grounded and much more radical. I mean that the practice needs a conscious, examined, honestly held answer to the question of why. Why train? Why suffer? Why become capable? Why discipline the body? Why face fear? Why enter the hard exchange? Why stay on the mat when you could be elsewhere, dry, comfortable, and unchallenged? If the answer is only dominance, validation, external success, or endless preparation for a violence that, for most practitioners in the modern world, will never actually arrive, then the path has already been reduced to something much smaller than it could be. And eventually, for anyone with enough experience or enough inward honesty, that reduction begins to rot from within.

This is why the technique-obsessed culture of modern martial arts feels so thin to me now. Scroll through the subreddits, the reels, the endless arguments about optimal combinations, perfect entries, superior guards, best submissions, real versus fake, street versus sport, style against style, and beneath all the noise, you can feel the deeper poverty. There is no shortage of information. There is very little wisdom.

There is a frenzy of technique and a famine of meaning. People are collecting moves while quietly starving for a reason to be on the path at all.

Hadot would have recognised the pathology immediately. He spent his career showing that the ancient philosophical schools, the Stoics, the Epicureans, the Cynics, the Platonists, never separated their intellectual work from their practical disciplines. Philosophy was not a body of doctrine to be memorised. It was a set of spiritual exercises, practices of attention, reflection, self-examination, and deliberate living through which a person gradually transformed their relationship to themselves and to the world. The exercises were the philosophy. Without them, the ideas were dead letters. With them, the ideas became embodied wisdom. Hadot argued that modern culture had largely lost this understanding, reducing philosophy to academic theory and leaving ordinary people without the practices they needed to live examined, purposeful lives.

Martial arts, in its deepest form, is one of those practices. Or it should be. It should be the place where the body becomes the site of philosophical work, where discipline becomes self-examination, where the encounter with an opponent becomes the encounter with your own fear, your own ego, your own patterns of avoidance and aggression. But that can only happen if the practice is held within a framework of meaning that goes beyond the next belt, the next win, the next proof of adequacy. Without that framework, martial arts becomes exactly what Hadot warned philosophy had become: a set of techniques severed from the wisdom that once gave them life.

Please do not misunderstand me here. Technique matters. I have spent my life sorting what works from what is fantasy. I will never pretend otherwise. The body needs real skill. The world contains real danger. Competence is not optional and never has been. But technique without purpose becomes a kind of spiritual hoarding. A person keeps

gathering, accumulating, refining, and polishing, while the deeper question of who they are becoming through all this remains untouched. The result is not mastery. It is sophisticated emptiness. And sophisticated emptiness, because it looks so much like the real thing, can go undiagnosed for an entire career.

The old martial arts traditions, for all their limitations, understood something we seem in danger of forgetting entirely. Martial practice was never only about the body. It was a vehicle for shaping the whole person. That does not mean historical schools always lived up to that ideal. Many did not. There was violence, rigidity, abuse, and hierarchy there too, and I have no interest in romanticising the past or pretending that traditional martial arts were some golden age of enlightened practice. They were not. But the deeper aspiration existed. The wider frame was there. Technique was not meant to float free of ethical, philosophical, and spiritual development. Strength without wisdom was not considered complete. Real mastery had to do with the formation of character, with discernment, restraint, courage, and a certain hard-won relationship to power itself. Once that wider frame collapses, the practice becomes vulnerable to the worst instincts of whatever age it finds itself in. In our age, that means it becomes another commodity, another performance, another ladder of status, another arena for the achievement society to do its corrosive work.

And that is precisely what has happened in too many places.

The art has been hollowed out in much the same way mindfulness has been hollowed out, and the parallel is instructive. Something once connected to the deepest kind of human transformation gets severed from its roots and repackaged in the service of modern goals. Mindfulness, which in its Buddhist origins was part of an entire path aimed at the cessation of suffering and the cultivation of wisdom, becomes "focus training for productivity." Yoga, which was once a comprehensive discipline of

liberation, becomes a workout. And martial arts, which was once a practice of self-formation, of arete, of learning to live with courage and composure in a world that does not owe you either, becomes belts, titles, victories, fame, status, and consumer-driven success. The shell remains recognisable. The animating centre has been replaced. What was once about becoming turns into a marketplace of accomplishments. What was once a path becomes a product.

This is where the hollow victory becomes more than a private feeling. It becomes a cultural diagnosis.

The emptiness many martial artists feel is not only personal confusion. It is evidence that they have been offered a diminished version of the path. They were promised that winning would give them self-worth, that belts would give them confidence, that being feared would make them secure, that becoming harder would make them whole. Then, when the inner life continues to ache despite all the achievements, they blame themselves. They assume they still need more intensity, more proof, more external validation. Rarely do they stop to ask whether the formula itself is broken.

I want to say clearly that the formula is broken.

It does not fail because it produces nothing. It produces plenty: skill, confidence of a certain kind, toughness, capacity, structure, belonging, identity. All of these can matter. It fails because people ask it to answer a deeper hunger it was never designed to address in its reduced form. They ask technique to become purpose. They ask victory to become meaning. They ask respect from others to become peace with themselves. They ask external proof to cure internal estrangement. And eventually, for anyone with enough experience or enough honesty to stay with the question, they discover that the whole thing was misframed from the beginning.

This is where martial arts either begins to deepen or decays into empty repetition.

The deepening starts with a very hard question. Not: can I win? Not: can I survive? Not: can I dominate? But: what kind of person does this practice make me when I walk off the mat? Is it making me calmer under pressure, or simply more aggressive? More present, or more controlling? More capable of peace, or more addicted to proving? More useful to the people around me, or merely more impressive in certain rooms? Does it help me live better, love better, carry difficulty better, meet uncertainty better, and remain human in a hard world? Or has it simply given me another costume in which to perform strength while the deeper self remains untouched?

Those questions disturbed me long before they clarified anything.

There is no clean pride in realising that much of what made you formidable also kept you narrow. There is no easy comfort in seeing that some of your discipline was driven by fear, some of your hardness by woundedness, some of your technical obsession by avoidance, some of your identity by the need to remain immune from older feelings of vulnerability. Yet that is precisely why the questioning matters. It is only at that point, the point where the old armour starts to feel more like a cage than protection, that the path can stop being a theatre of compensation and start becoming a place of genuine transformation.

That was the turning point for me. Not a rejection of martial arts, but a reimagining of everything I thought it was.

I did not want to abandon hard-earned effectiveness. I wanted to fulfil its highest promise. I wanted a martial path that could still fight if needed, still distinguish fantasy from function, still remain deadly serious about violence and its

consequences, but that would no longer mistake preparation for war as the whole meaning of training. I began to see what Aurelius had been pointing toward, what Aristotle had codified, what every serious martial tradition in history had understood in one form or another: the deeper promise of martial arts is not war but peace. Not the passive peace of someone who has never been tested. The hard peace of someone who has faced enough of themselves and the world that they no longer need to worship force, because they know what force is, what it costs, and what it cannot give you.

The hollow victory is not the end of the martial path. It is the end of one misunderstanding of it. It is the painful, necessary moment at which the old rewards stop carrying enough meaning, and a person is forced to decide whether they want to remain a fighter only, or become something rarer: a martial artist in the deeper sense. Someone whose training no longer serves the endless proving of the self, but the transformation of the self. Someone who no longer asks only what works, but what is worth becoming. Someone who sees that danger, skill, intensity, and force all have their place, but that none of them, alone or together, can answer the question of how to live.

And that is where we must turn next. Because once the old victory has gone hollow, the dojo itself begins to look different. The mats, the rituals, the hierarchies, the competition, the spectacle, the social machinery of modern martial culture, all of it comes under a harsher and more truthful light. One starts asking not only why the victory feels empty, but what sort of world this practice has become entangled with, and whether a different kind of dojo, built on different foundations, might be possible.

# Chapter 3: When the Dojo Becomes a Stage

One of the bitterest things I have had to admit over the years is that modern martial arts, in far too many places, no longer stands in meaningful opposition to the sickness of the age. It mirrors it.

That is not a small accusation, and I do not make it lightly.

Martial arts should, in principle, be one of the last places where a human being can go to be stripped of illusion. It should humble you. It should teach you that your ego is not your strength, that your fear cannot be outrun by performance, that the body tells the truth, that force has consequences, that discipline matters, that bravado collapses under real pressure, and that genuine confidence does not need theatre. At its best, a dojo should be one of the last honest rooms left in the modern world, a place where reality is allowed back in when the rest of life has been carefully arranged to keep it out.

And yet more and more, what I see is something else entirely.

I see the dojo becoming another stage. An extension of everything that is wrong with modernity.

In 1967, the French theorist Guy Debord published a book called *The Society of the Spectacle*. His argument, radical at the time and prophetic in hindsight, was that modern life had been colonised by spectacle, that the real texture of human experience, direct encounter, embodied presence, genuine relationship, honest struggle, was being progressively replaced by its representation. Life was becoming

something to be watched, displayed, consumed, and performed rather than something to be lived. Debord saw that this was not simply a matter of entertainment or media. It was a fundamental transformation in the way human beings related to their own existence. When the spectacle takes hold, everything, including rebellion, including authenticity, including depth, becomes raw material for the image. Even your resistance to the system becomes content for the system. Even your sincerity becomes a performance of sincerity.

When I look at the dominant culture of modern martial arts, I see Debord's spectacle everywhere. And I see it not only in the obvious places, the UFC highlight reels, the influencer coaches, the branded gym empires, but in the subtler and perhaps more damaging ways that the logic of spectacle has penetrated the training floor itself.

I see martial arts schools and fight gyms reproducing the very values they should be helping people see through. I see performance, brand-building, status anxiety, endless comparison, image management, tribalism, follower counts, externally validated success, and a strange obsession with looking like a warrior rather than becoming one. I see people preaching self-mastery while chasing applause, preaching respect while quietly living off comparison, and preaching ancient values while packaging themselves for the modern marketplace. I see a culture that still uses the language of discipline, honour, and tradition, but often in the service of something far more familiar and far less noble: the relentless production of the self as commodity.

Once you see it, it is very hard to unsee.

You see it in the way schools market themselves. The language is revealing, more revealing than most people who use it realise. Be a champion. Build confidence. Gain respect. Learn to dominate. Become unstoppable. Become elite. Level up. Crush your goals. Win. Advance. Rise above the rest. None of this is accidental. It is perfectly

calibrated to the wider culture of self-optimisation, competition, and visible success. Martial arts is sold the way everything else is sold now, as a pathway to superior selfhood, a method of becoming more impressive, more validated, more enviable, more secure. The practice is no longer protected from the market's logic. It is one of its more convincing expressions. The gi has become a costume for the achievement society.

Alasdair MacIntyre, one of the most important moral philosophers of the last century, drew a distinction that I think cuts to the heart of what has gone wrong. He distinguished between what he called "practices" and "institutions." A practice, in MacIntyre's sense, is an activity that has internal goods, goods that can only be achieved by engaging in the activity itself and submitting to its standards of excellence. Chess is a practice. Painting is a practice. Farming is a practice. And martial arts, in its deepest form, is a practice. The internal goods of martial arts include things like self-knowledge, embodied composure, courage under pressure, the capacity for honest self-assessment, the discipline of sustained effort, and the kind of practical wisdom that comes only from years of genuine engagement with difficulty. These goods cannot be faked, bought, or shortcut. They can only be developed through committed participation in the practice itself.

An institution, by contrast, is the social structure that grows up around a practice and is concerned with external goods: money, status, power, reputation, and control. Institutions are necessary. Without them, practices cannot survive in the world. But MacIntyre warned that institutions always tend to corrupt the practices they house, because external goods, money, fame, rank, influence, are inherently competitive in a way that internal goods are not. When the institution's values begin to dominate, the practice gets hollowed out from within. People start pursuing the external goods and

mistaking them for the internal ones. They chase the belt instead of the transformation the belt was supposed to represent. They pursue the title instead of the character the title was supposed to certify. They accumulate credentials instead of cultivating wisdom. The shell remains. The substance is quietly replaced.

That is exactly what has happened to martial arts on a massive scale.

The institutions of modern martial arts, the organisations, the franchise models, the competition circuits, the certification bodies, the media platforms, have grown so dominant that they now define what martial arts means for most people. And what they define it as is a system of external goods: rankings, titles, belt progression, competitive records, follower counts, brand recognition, and market share. The internal goods, the ones that actually transform a person, have been pushed to the margins when they have not been eliminated altogether. A school can produce a world champion and still have failed utterly as a dojo if the person who walks off that mat has no greater self-knowledge, no deeper capacity for peace, no richer relationship to their own fear and vulnerability than when they started.

That is where the art begins to thin.

Because when martial arts becomes just another means of proving your value in the world's terms, it stops interrupting the dominant script and starts feeding it. The belts matter because they are visible. The titles matter because they travel socially. The trophies matter because they can be displayed. The social media clips matter because they are currency. The black belt becomes less a responsibility and more an identity asset. The fighter becomes less a disciplined practitioner and more a kind of branded self. The whole thing is dressed in the old symbols, the gi, the bow, the ritual language, the lineage talk, the occasional quotation from Sun Tzu or Musashi, but

underneath it all, the engine is modern and painfully familiar. Show me you matter. Show me you are ahead. Show me you are dangerous. Show me you are winning.

I know how attractive that engine can be, because I have lived inside parts of it myself.

There is an undeniable satisfaction in visible progression. In being recognised. In standing out. In carrying a reputation that means something when you walk into a room. If you have grown up feeling powerless, unseen, or preyed upon, as I did, then the hunger to become someone nobody will overlook again can run deeper than most people who have not lived it can imagine. Martial arts can feed that hunger magnificently. It can give shape to a person who once felt shapeless. It can make the timid more solid, the fragmented more disciplined, the fearful more capable. That is not false. I owe my life, in part, to that exact process. But the very thing that heals at one stage can become poison at another if it is never brought under deeper examination. The need to become strong can slowly harden into the need to be seen as strong. The need to survive can turn imperceptibly into the need to dominate. The love of training can become entangled with the addiction to recognition. What began as a path becomes a performance.

That is where the stage lights come on.

When I say the dojo becomes a stage, I do not mean only social media, though social media has intensified everything beyond measure. I mean something broader and more structural. I mean that training stops being primarily a place of encounter with reality and becomes a place of presentation. One trains not only to learn, but to be seen learning. One spars not only to sharpen, but to confirm identity. One teaches not only to serve, but to consolidate status. Even humility can become part of the costume. Everyone in the modern martial arts world knows how to look serious.

Everyone knows how to talk about lineage, honour, respect, and sacrifice. Everyone knows how to perform devotion to the path. But a stage is still a stage, no matter how convincing the performance.

Debord predicted exactly this: that the spectacle would eventually absorb even its own opposition. The system does not fear your rebellion. It photographs it, markets it, and sells it back to you as content. The "warrior" who posts philosophical quotations on Instagram while carefully curating his image of rugged depth is not resisting the spectacle. He is the spectacle. His apparent nonconformity is itself a product, and a particularly marketable one at that. The aesthetics of the outsider have been domesticated. What looks like rebellion is often just another flavour of compliance.

This is one reason modern martial arts can feel so spiritually confusing. It often looks deep. It has all the symbols of depth. It can speak the right language. It can even produce moments of genuine transformation. But the whole environment may still be organised around external metrics that slowly poison the deeper work. A school can talk endlessly about self-mastery and still subtly train people to locate their worth in rank, visibility, and dominance. A gym can talk about brotherhood and still be structured by comparison, exclusion, and pecking-order status. A teacher can speak beautifully about restraint while carefully curating his own myth. The words point one direction. The rewards point another. And people, being the adaptive creatures they are, follow the rewards.

This shift is not trivial. It changes what students believe the practice is for.

Foucault understood this with characteristic precision. He spent years studying what he called "disciplinary institutions," environments like prisons, schools, hospitals, and military barracks that shape human behaviour not primarily through explicit rules but through what he called "normalisation": the invisible pressures that teach people what

counts as acceptable, desirable, and real. You do not need to tell a person what to value. You simply need to construct an environment where certain behaviours are rewarded and others are ignored or punished, and the person will absorb the lesson without ever being aware they have received it. They will internalise the values of the institution and mistake them for their own convictions.

The modern dojo is a disciplinary institution in exactly this sense. If the culture of the dojo tells students, directly or indirectly, that success means ranking above others, collecting belts, winning publicly, building a feared or admired identity, and becoming visibly impressive, then that becomes the lived philosophy of the place, no matter what lofty ideals are painted on the wall. People absorb philosophy through atmosphere more than through slogans. They learn it by what gets rewarded. They learn it by what gets applause. They learn it by how the teacher carries himself, by how senior students treat newer ones, by whether the room values cooperation or humiliation, whether sparring is dialogue or domination, and whether intensity is used to sharpen awareness or to inflate ego. The whole room teaches, constantly and relentlessly, even when nobody is formally teaching.

I have been in schools where the official language was all about discipline, humility, and respect, but the lived atmosphere was pure hierarchy and insecurity. You could feel it in the air. Students were not really there to become more whole. They were there to climb. To impress. To harden. To avoid humiliation. To win subtle and not-so-subtle contests of worth. The training may have been technically excellent. That is not the point. The point is what sort of human environment it created. A place can produce highly capable fighters and still fail catastrophically as a dojo in the deeper sense if it trains people to reproduce the anxieties, vanities, and competitive

pathologies of the wider world rather than developing the capacity to see through them.

That, in my view, is exactly what far too much modern martial arts now does.

The wider culture already tells people that they are not enough, that they must prove themselves endlessly, that visibility matters, that competition is the natural order, that worth is something externalised and measured, that domination is strength, and that the winner is more real than the one who does not win. Byung-Chul Han has described this condition as the hallmark of the "achievement society," where the external oppressor has been replaced by the internal taskmaster, where people exploit themselves more ruthlessly than any boss would dare, and where the language of freedom, passion, and self-realisation masks what is actually a new and more efficient form of subjugation. Then the dojo comes along and tells the same story in another accent. Train harder. Beat him. Rise. Prove yourself. Get the next belt. Win the tournament. Build the image. Become known. Be respected. Fear and insecurity do not disappear in that environment. They simply become more sophisticated. They put on hand wraps and motivational language.

That should disturb us far more than it currently does.

Because the true martial path should not conform to the status quo. It should create people who are less easily hypnotised by the values of the age. Less governed by performance. Less dependent on external markers. Less seduced by the theatre of power. More capable of standing within themselves, unmoved by the winds that bend everyone else. If the dojo cannot do that, if it cannot produce human beings who are more free, more honest, and more self-possessed than the culture that surrounds them, then it has failed its deepest purpose. It has become just another social machine that manufactures modern selves under the banner of ancient wisdom.

This is why the old films mattered so much to me as a child, and why they still matter symbolically now.

The martial hero in those stories was not compelling because he fit the status quo more elegantly than the people around him. He mattered because he stood against it. He saw through corruption. He refused the false order. He trained outside the smooth logic of ordinary society. He was often a problem for the world around him precisely because he could not be fully absorbed into its values. That is what made him magnetic. Not the violence alone. The refusal. The freedom. The sense that his training had placed him in deeper allegiance to truth than to conformity. He was Camus's rebel with calloused hands. He was the embodied no.

That spirit has largely been lost in the modern martial arts world. Or rather, it survives in fragments while the surrounding culture keeps trying to neutralise it, to absorb it into the spectacle, to turn even the renegade impulse into a marketable brand.

Now the "warrior" too often becomes a product. He looks right. He posts the quotes. He moves well on camera. He sells intensity. He speaks of honour and brotherhood and high standards. Yet he may still be completely captured by the same need for followers, attention, status, and distinction that drives the rest of modern life. He may still be living inside the same economy of comparison, merely with better shoulders and a more dangerous aesthetic. That is not the outsider hero of the old stories. That is the conformist in martial dress. He has not transcended the culture. He has decorated himself with symbols of transcendence while remaining utterly captive to its logic.

I remember being a boy, sitting on the cold dojo floor while my old-school sensei, a man who had served in Angola and carried the war in his body the way some men

carry it in their eyes, told us that karate was the art of mastering oneself, not an art of violence, and that a karateka never executes the first blow. At the time, in the world I came from, I thought he was mad. Where I grew up, the one who hit first often survived. His words sounded almost irresponsible to the younger version of me, the boy who needed weapons, not philosophy. But age has a cruel and clarifying way of returning you to truths you once dismissed as irrelevant. Decades later, after the doors, after the cage, after the hundreds of altercations and the thousands of rounds, I understand exactly what he meant. The boys I feared on the street were not warriors. They were products of a culture that taught them domination was the only real language of worth. They were dangerous, certainly. Some of them terrifyingly so. But they had no freedom. They were completely determined by the very environment they believed they were conquering. My sensei was pointing to something far rarer and far harder: mastery not of the opponent, but of the self that wants to become a vessel for the world's sickness. The self that absorbs the culture's violence and calls it strength. The self that internalises the culture's metrics and calls it ambition. The self that conforms to the culture's definition of power and calls it independence.

That is the deepest form of conformity there is, and modern martial arts is saturated with it.

What the tradition understood, and what we seem in danger of forgetting entirely, is that the true warrior has always been defined as much by what he refuses as by what he can do.

He refuses to let aggression become identity. He refuses to let competition become metaphysics. He refuses to measure his worth by belts, rankings, medals, followers, or the fear he inspires in others. He refuses to mistake the adoration of the crowd for the formation of the soul. He refuses to let training become another venue in which

modernity's sickness is reproduced under the noble language of discipline. In that refusal, something ancient stirs. Not nostalgia. Not romanticism. Something closer to the original impulse that gave martial arts their depth in the first place: the understanding that the capacity for violence must be held within a larger framework of wisdom, restraint, and self-knowledge, or it becomes merely another form of the brutality it was meant to overcome.

That is a deeply countercultural stance now. Perhaps more countercultural than it has ever been.

Because everything around us pushes the opposite way. The camera wants highlight reels. The market wants marketable identity. The gym culture wants tribe and hierarchy. The internet wants polarity, performance, and constant signalling. Even competition, which can teach something real under the right conditions, gets swallowed by the larger atmosphere of proving. People stop competing to test themselves and begin competing to reassure themselves that they exist in the right way, that they matter, that they are above the line. The pressure may look exciting from the outside, but inwardly it often breeds the very anxiety, comparison, and restless dissatisfaction that martial arts training should be alleviating.

This is why I cannot simply blame social media or combat sports and be done with it. They are accelerants, not origins. The deeper problem is that martial arts has been infected by the same pathology that has infected nearly everything else in modern life. The pathology of externalised worth. The pathology of visible success as the primary measure of a meaningful life. The pathology of turning practices once rooted in self-knowledge into zero-sum competitions for recognition. The dojo does not become a stage because cameras exist. It becomes a stage because the culture no

longer knows how to honour depth without translating it into spectacle. Because we have lost, collectively, the capacity to value what cannot be displayed.

And once spectacle enters fully, brotherhood begins to corrode.

This matters enormously, and it matters especially for men.

One of the great unspoken tragedies of the modern world is that men are more disconnected from one another than most will ever admit. Beneath the performances of confidence and capability, an epidemic of isolation festers. Many men will quietly confess, if asked honestly enough and in a room safe enough, that they have no one they can call in a moment of genuine need. No real brotherhood. No deep place of truth. What they have instead are arenas of comparison. Work. Status. Money. Achievement. Influence. The gym. The feed. The tribe. Everywhere the same message: be stronger, richer, tougher, more dominant, more admired, more visible. And martial arts, which could have become one of the last refuges from that madness, too often reinforces it instead. Gym against gym. Style against style. Team against team. Fighter against fighter. Everyone measuring. Everyone posturing. Everyone subtly or overtly proving. Keep men comparing and they never stand together. Keep them competing for rank and they never learn to trust. Keep them performing strength and they never discover the deeper kind that only comes from honest vulnerability with another human being.

Aristotle distinguished three kinds of friendship. The first is based on utility: I am your friend because you are useful to me. The second is based on pleasure: I am your friend because I enjoy your company. The third, which Aristotle considered the only true friendship, is based on virtue, on a shared commitment to the good, on mutual recognition of each other's character, on the desire to see the other person flourish not because it benefits you but because you genuinely care about who they are becoming.

This third kind of friendship is slow, rare, and demanding. It requires the kind of honesty that utility friendships cannot survive and the kind of depth that pleasure friendships do not need. It requires, in short, exactly the qualities that a genuine dojo should be cultivating: trust, truthfulness, mutual respect grounded in character rather than rank, and the willingness to hold one another accountable not to external standards of performance but to the internal standard of becoming a good human being.

How much of what passes for "brotherhood" in modern martial arts culture would survive Aristotle's test? In too many places, what we call brotherhood is really a utility friendship dressed in the language of loyalty: I belong to this gym because it serves my goals, because the coach validates my identity, because the team makes me feel powerful. Or it is a pleasure friendship driven by the shared excitement of training, of competition, of the adrenaline bond that comes from hard sparring. These are not nothing. They have their place. But they are not what the tradition means by brotherhood, and when they are mistaken for the real thing, the result is a community that looks solid from the outside but fractures the moment genuine difficulty, disagreement, or vulnerability enters the room.

The result is a terrible contradiction. We say martial arts builds community, but often what it really builds is controlled competition with occasional rituals of solidarity layered over the top. We call it brotherhood, but in too many places what we really mean is conditional belonging inside a hierarchy of value. We call it respect, but respect becomes another social performance, another currency, another mask worn over insecurity and the endless struggle for status. I am not saying this is true everywhere. There are schools and communities doing something far better, something that genuinely approaches what Aristotle meant by virtue friendship. But

the larger trend is unmistakable. The dojo increasingly reflects the same atomising forces that have hollowed out the rest of modern life, the same substitution of performance for presence, of competition for connection, of brand for bond.

This is why I think the question is no longer merely how we preserve martial arts, but what kind of martial arts is worth preserving.

Not everything deserves saving simply because it is old or hard. Not every gym culture deserves loyalty because it produces winners. Not every school that turns out black belts has understood the art. The deeper question, the one that most people in this industry would rather avoid, is what sort of human beings are being formed in these environments. Are they becoming more whole? More calm under pressure? More truthful? More responsible with power? More able to stay present in difficulty without needing to dominate it? More capable of genuine relationship, restraint, and service? Or are they simply becoming more polished vessels for the same old modern sickness, better equipped to perform strength while remaining inwardly captive to comparison, validation, and the unexamined need to prove they are enough?

Those questions cut deep. It is meant to.

It cuts because it cannot be answered with trophies or lineage charts or social proof. It must be answered in the way a person walks off the mat and into the rest of their life. It must be answered in the tone they carry into a room, in how they handle being wrong, in how they treat weaker partners, in whether training makes them more capable of peace or merely more dangerous in conflict, in whether they need the world to keep seeing them as strong in order to feel solid within themselves.

I had to ask myself those questions, and I'm not going to lie, it was fucking Hard.

Because it is one thing to criticise the stage. It is another thing entirely to admit the extent to which you, too, have stepped onto it. The hunger to be respected. The pride in being seen as formidable. The satisfaction of outer accomplishment. The subtle gravitational pull of identity. I know all of that from the inside, intimately, and it would be dishonest to write this book as though I had always seen through it. I did not. I was shaped by the same forces I am describing, and in some seasons of my life, I was as captured by them as anyone. But once the deeper cracks opened, once the hollowness of the old victories became undeniable, I could no longer avoid the larger conclusion. If martial arts were to remain alive for me, it had to cease being another stage. It had to become something closer to a laboratory of truth: a place where the masks came off, where intensity served awakening rather than ego, and where training was measured not only by what it produced in the body but by what it made possible in the soul.

That, I think, is the real dividing line. And it is worth drawing sharply.

A stage asks how you look. A dojo, in the older and deeper sense of that word, asks what is being formed. A stage rewards performance. A dojo tests reality. A stage feeds identity. A dojo strips it. A stage makes the self more dependent on the gaze of others. A dojo, if it is functioning as it should, gradually frees the self from that dependence by placing it under a more severe and more honest authority than public approval: the authority of the practice itself, which does not care about your brand, your following, your belt, or your reputation, and which will expose you with perfect indifference to all the ways you are still hiding.

Simone Weil, the French philosopher and mystic who understood suffering and attention better than almost anyone in the twentieth century, wrote that the proper function of a school is to teach the capacity for attention, and that this capacity, once

developed, becomes the substance of prayer, of love, of genuine encounter with reality. Weil's vision of education was the opposite of what most schools actually deliver. She was not interested in the accumulation of information or the production of credentials. She was interested in the formation of a certain quality of presence, a quality she believed could only be cultivated through sustained, disciplined engagement with something genuinely difficult. The student who wrestles honestly with a mathematical problem, Weil argued, is developing the same capacity for attention that will later allow them to sit with a suffering friend without turning away, or to face their own mortality without flinching.

I think the dojo, at its best, does exactly what Weil described. It teaches attention. Not the scattered, performative attention of the multitasker. Not the anxious, hypervigilant attention of the person who is always scanning for threat. But the deep, quiet, fully present attention that arises when a person stops performing and starts engaging with what is actually in front of them. This quality of attention is the foundation of everything that matters in martial arts and in life: composure under pressure, honest self-assessment, the capacity to see a situation clearly rather than through the distorting lens of ego, and the ability to respond with intelligence rather than react from conditioning. When the dojo becomes a stage, this attention is the first casualty. People stop paying attention to reality and start paying attention to how they appear. They stop training and start performing. And the deeper work, the work that actually transforms a human being, becomes impossible.

When that deeper authority is lost, the practice still goes on, but its centre changes. It may become spectacular. It may become financially successful. It may produce skilled and even extraordinary fighters. But if it no longer points beyond itself toward the formation of a deeper kind of human being, then it is no longer art in the fullest

sense of that word. It has become combat athletics, or physical theatre, or identity technology, or social hierarchy with gloves on. It may still be exciting. It may still be entertaining. It may still produce occasional moments of genuine beauty. But it is no longer what I mean by martial art.

And that is why the stage must be named.

Not because naming it solves everything, not because I imagine that a single book can reverse the forces of an entire culture, but because one cannot reclaim the path while pretending not to see the forces that have hollowed it out. The first move is always honesty. The dojo has, in too many places, become another stage for modernity's obsessions. The spectacle has entered the training floor. The market has colonised the curriculum. The achievement society has rewritten the values of the practice in its own image. Once we admit that clearly, without defensive qualification and without pretending it is someone else's problem, another possibility appears. We can ask what sort of environment, what sort of teacher, what sort of training culture, what sort of atmosphere would actually resist those forces rather than amplify them. We can ask what it would look like to build a dojo that is genuinely countercultural, not in the superficial sense of branding itself as rebellious, but in the deeper sense of actually forming human beings who are freer, more honest, and more whole than the culture that surrounds them.

That is where we have to go next.

Because if the dojo has become a stage, then what we need is not merely better branding, kinder language, or a slightly more enlightened version of the same performance. What we need is to recover the art itself. We need to ask what was lost when martial practice was reduced to physicality, utility, and external proof, and what it would mean to bring the deeper dimensions back, not by drifting into fantasy, not

by retreating into empty mysticism, not by abandoning the hard physical honesty that makes martial arts unique among human practices, but by insisting that the body's discipline must serve something larger than the body's display. By insisting that the capacity for violence must be held within the capacity for wisdom. By insisting that the martial and the art are not two separate things, one practical and one decorative, but two aspects of a single practice that only reaches its full depth when both are present, alive, and in conversation with each other.

That conversation is what the rest of this book is about.

# Chapter 4: The Death of the Art

The death of an art rarely happens all at once.

It does not usually arrive with a loud declaration, as if someone walks into the dojo, pulls down the old calligraphy, and announces that from this day forward we will care only for medals, money, and marketing. If it happened that way, it would be easier to resist. People would feel the insult. They would recognise the betrayal. They would know exactly what had been lost and perhaps even rally to protect it. But that is not how decay works. It arrives more quietly than that. It enters through emphasis. Through neglect. Through the gradual hardening of one value at the expense of others until, years later, something once alive still has the same name but no longer has the same soul.

That, to me, is what has happened across much of modern martial arts.

The forms remain recognisable. The mats are still there. The rituals are still there. The ranking systems are still there. The talk of discipline, respect, humility, and mastery is still there. The techniques are still being practised, often at a level of physical sophistication that previous generations could not have imagined. In some places the training is harder than ever, sharper than ever, more impressive by every measurable standard. Yet for all that apparent vitality, something essential has been hollowed out. The path is still moving, but its centre has shifted. What was once art becomes performance, utility, sport, brand, or consumer identity. The practice survives. The art begins to die.

That sentence may sound too severe. I do not think it is.

To understand why, we have to ask what *art* actually means. Not as a decorative category. Not as an afterthought tacked onto the word "martial" to make fighting sound more respectable. But as a philosophical claim about the nature of the practice itself.

The ancient Greeks did not separate art from knowledge the way we do. Their word *techne* encompassed what we now fragment into craft, skill, art, and applied knowledge. A sculptor possessed *techne*. A physician possessed *techne*. A shipbuilder possessed *techne*. But *techne* was never merely instrumental. It was not reducible to "getting the job done." Aristotle defined *techne* as a productive capacity guided by true understanding, a way of making that required insight into why things were made the way they were, not just how to make them. The craftsman who could build a table but had no understanding of proportion, purpose, or the relationship between form and use was not exercising *techne* in the fullest sense. He was merely executing. The difference matters immensely, because execution without understanding can produce objects, but it cannot produce meaning. It can replicate forms but it cannot generate the intelligence that originally shaped them.

The martial arts, in their deepest expression, were always a form of *techne* in this richer sense. They were not catalogues of effective movements. They were bodies of knowledge about how a human being could be shaped through disciplined physical practice toward something like wholeness. The techniques were means, not ends. They were the material through which a deeper work was accomplished: the formation of a person who could face fear without being consumed by it, exercise power without being corrupted by it, endure suffering without being destroyed by it, and carry themselves through the world with a composure that was not performed but genuinely inhabited. The art was never only in the punch, the throw, the lock, or the

choke. The art was in what repeated encounter with those things revealed and refined in the practitioner. The body was the medium. The self was the work.

When that understanding collapses, the practice does not necessarily become less physically impressive. It may become more so. But it loses its depth in the same way a cathedral loses its meaning when it is converted into a shopping centre. The architecture may still be beautiful. The space may still be striking. But the organising purpose that gave every stone its significance has been replaced by something thinner, and no amount of aesthetic preservation can disguise the substitution.

This is precisely what has happened to martial arts on a civilisational scale.

Martin Heidegger, in one of his most penetrating and difficult essays, argued that the modern age is defined by a particular relationship to the world that he called *Gestell*, typically translated as "enframing." *Gestell* is the disposition that reduces everything to a resource, a standing reserve to be optimised, extracted, and put to use. Under the logic of *Gestell*, a river is not a river. It is a potential hydroelectric resource. A forest is not a forest. It is a timber reserve. A human being is not a human being. They are human capital, a bundle of skills to be developed, deployed, and measured for productivity. Heidegger's point was not that technology is evil but that the technological way of seeing has become so total, so pervasive, that we can no longer perceive the world, or ourselves, in any other terms. Everything becomes instrumental. Everything becomes material for use. And in the process, something essential about the nature of things, their capacity to reveal meaning that exceeds their utility, is lost.

When I read Heidegger's analysis of *Gestell*, I recognise the fate of modern martial arts with uncomfortable precision. The practice has been enframed. It has been reduced to a resource: a resource for fitness, for self-defence, for competitive success,

for confidence-building, for brand identity, for content creation, for career advancement, for social status. None of these uses is inherently wrong. Some of them are valuable. But when they become the totality of what the practice means, something irreplaceable disappears. The practice ceases to be what Heidegger would call a site of disclosure, a place where truths about human existence are revealed that cannot be revealed any other way, and becomes instead another mechanism in the vast machinery of modern utility. The martial art becomes a martial technology. And a technology, no matter how sophisticated, is not an art.

That is where the death begins. Not with the interest in function. Function matters. I have spent my entire life insisting that it matters, that technique must work, that the body must be trained honestly, that the gap between what people imagine they can do and what they can actually do under pressure must be closed with ruthless care. I will never back away from that insistence. But the death begins where function becomes the whole story. Where every dimension of the practice that cannot be immediately converted into measurable advantage is treated as optional, decorative, or obsolete.

I understand why this happens. The world we live in is relentlessly instrumental. Everything is pressed toward use, output, measurable value, and visible results. Hannah Arendt, in *The Human Condition*, distinguished between three fundamental forms of human activity: labour (which sustains biological life), work (which creates the durable world of objects and institutions), and action (which is the uniquely human capacity to begin something new, to disclose who one is through engagement with others). Arendt's concern was that modernity had progressively collapsed all three into the logic of labour, that the mentality of production, consumption, and endless cyclical process had swallowed up the higher forms of human activity. We no longer build things to last. We produce things to consume. We no longer act to

disclose ourselves. We perform to be measured. The logic of the assembly line has invaded the logic of the soul.

Martial arts has not been immune to this invasion. It could not have been. Parents want confidence for their children. Adults want fitness, self-defence, discipline, or the thrill of competition. Fighters want wins. Coaches want successful athletes. Gym owners want paying members. Influencers want attention. None of this, taken in isolation, is especially mysterious or reprehensible. But once the logic of utility becomes total, once the practice is understood entirely within the framework of inputs and outputs, costs and benefits, investments and returns, the old wider horizon begins to disappear. The mat is no longer a place in which one meets oneself. It becomes a mechanism for producing desirable outcomes. The art becomes a service. The dojo becomes a factory. *And the practitioner becomes a consumer who evaluates the practice by asking what it can do for them rather than what it might make of them.*

This has happened so thoroughly in some places that people no longer notice how strange it is.

They are perfectly comfortable asking what style is best, what system is most effective, what training gives the fastest results, what ranking structure has the most credibility, what gym produces the most winners, what content gets the most traction, what approach is most practical, what technique works under pressure. Again, none of these questions is illegitimate. I have asked versions of them myself. But if a martial culture becomes unable to ask anything deeper than that, if the only questions it can formulate are questions of efficiency and outcome, then it has already been fully colonised by Gestell. It has ceased to be a path of formation and become another technology of optimisation. It has become, in Arendt's terms, mere labour: an endless cycle of effort and consumption that produces results but never produces meaning.

And once that happens, the practitioner changes as well.

When martial arts is approached mainly as an instrument, the self begins to treat it as one more external means to an end. I train to become better than I was. I train to become safer. I train to gain rank. I train to become more confident. I train to become harder to hurt. I train to gain status, identity, edge, capability, or control. Some of these motives may be understandable. Some may even be necessary in certain seasons of life. I do not judge them because I have lived most of them. But if they remain unexamined, if no deeper question ever interrupts the cycle, the art becomes permanently subordinate to egoic appetite. The practitioner does not enter the dojo to be shaped by truth. They enter to secure some version of themselves against the world. The path becomes another extension of the modern self: hungry, comparative, strategic, and deeply invested in external markers of adequacy.

At that point, even success begins to flatten.

A belt becomes a symbol of status rather than a marker of responsibility. A win becomes proof of worth rather than one moment in a larger discipline. A technique becomes something to possess rather than something through which one is refined. The body becomes a performance instrument rather than a site of self-knowledge. Training partners become obstacles, threats, measuring sticks, or mirrors of one's own insecurity rather than collaborators in a shared practice of becoming. Very little of this needs to be said aloud. The atmosphere teaches it. The room teaches it. The reward structure teaches it. And because so much of the wider culture already thinks in exactly these terms, people slip into the arrangement without feeling that anything sacred has been traded away.

But something has been traded away.

The trade is subtle, which is precisely what makes it so dangerous. One gives up depth for clarity of outcome. One gives up transformation for achievement. One gives up the art of becoming for the economics of proving. In return, one gets systems, metrics, standardisation, visibility, and a much easier story to tell. The practice becomes legible to modernity. It can now be marketed, measured, consumed, and compared with much greater ease. What gets lost is harder to count, and therefore easier to ignore. The slow moral shaping. The confrontation with fear, ego, cruelty, tenderness, limitation, and presence. The possibility that the real art was never only in the technique but in what the technique demanded of the person who practised it honestly enough and long enough for it to start dismantling their pretences.

That is the dimension I want to protect. That is what I mean when I say the art is dying.

Because once that dimension goes, martial arts may still remain physically demanding, culturally vibrant, and socially influential, but it ceases to be one of the great paths of human formation. It becomes another machine of skill acquisition under competitive pressure. Useful, perhaps. Impressive, often. Alive in the deeper sense, less and less.

Hadot saw this pattern clearly in the fate of ancient philosophy. The schools of the Stoics, the Epicureans, and the Cynics were not academic institutions in our sense. They were communities of practice where people engaged in what Hadot called "spiritual exercises": deliberate disciplines of attention, self-examination, reflection on mortality, and the cultivation of specific virtues through daily practice. Philosophy was not something you studied. It was something you did, with your body, your habits, your relationships, and your responses to difficulty. The exercises were the philosophy. The lived transformation was the point. But over centuries, as philosophy

became institutionalised within the academy, the exercises were gradually abandoned and replaced by commentary, analysis, and theoretical discourse. What had been a way of life became a subject of study. The shell of philosophical vocabulary survived. The animating practice died.

The parallel to martial arts is almost exact. What was once a way of life, a set of embodied practices aimed at the formation of a complete human being, has been progressively reduced to a subject of technical study, a system of skills to be acquired and deployed. The spiritual exercises of martial training, the confrontation with fear, the cultivation of composure, the practice of restraint, the development of moral courage through physical ordeal, have been starved of attention while the technical curriculum has been endlessly refined. We have become extraordinarily good at teaching people how to fight. We have become remarkably poor at helping them understand what fighting is for, what it costs, and what it demands of the person who carries the capacity for it through a life that will mostly require something other than violence.

I think one of the deepest confusions here lies in the modern obsession with mastery.

People love the word. It sounds serious. Noble. Ancient. It conjures images of the old masters, the figures of legend, the practitioners who spent decades refining their art until it seemed effortless. Yet much of what passes for mastery now is really just accumulation and polish. Enough repetitions, enough pressure testing, enough public proof, enough visible control, and one is said to have mastered something. But that is not how I understand mastery anymore. Real mastery is not static possession. It is not a summit one arrives at and plants a flag upon. It is an ever-deepening relationship to a path that keeps stripping away illusion. It is as much about how one trains, how one carries power, how one meets fear, how one relates to partners, how one handles

authority, how one bears defeat, how one integrates the practice into the rest of life, as it is about external technical capability. Mastery, if it means anything worth preserving, must involve the refinement of the whole person, not just the outer shell of competence.

Nietzsche understood this. His concept of self-overcoming, *Selbstüberwindung*, was not about achieving a fixed state of perfection. It was about the ongoing willingness to surpass what you have already become, to refuse the comfort of your current form, to keep moving beyond the version of yourself that has grown familiar and safe. Self-overcoming is uncomfortable precisely because it never ends. There is no plateau of arrival. There is only the continuous demand to go deeper, to become more honest, to shed another layer of self-deception, to face another aspect of your own limitation. The person who has "mastered" a technique but never questioned what that technique is doing to their character has not overcome anything. They have merely accumulated. And accumulation without transformation is not mastery. It is hoarding.

This is why I am drawn much more to the language of *arete* than to the language of mastery in the modern sense. *Arete* carries a fundamentally different atmosphere. It does not suggest a trophy on a shelf or a certification on a wall. It suggests excellence as a way of being, a continual striving toward the fullest expression of one's nature, rather than the fixed possession of a perfected state. *Arete* is more alive, more dynamic, and more human than anything the word "mastery" typically conjures in the modern imagination. It does not end in arrival. It keeps becoming. And crucially, it cannot be reduced to performance alone. It has to do with virtue, character, and form of life. It pushes against conformity and against the reduction of success to whatever the surrounding culture happens to reward.

In that sense, the martial artist as *artist* is not simply mastering a system. He is forging himself against the grain of the age. He is engaged in what Foucault would have recognised as a technology of the self, not the passive absorption of cultural norms but the active, deliberate, disciplined work of shaping oneself into something that the culture did not prescribe and may not even be able to recognise. Arete is inherently rebellious, not because it seeks confrontation, but because it refuses to accept the diminished standards that the world treats as sufficient. The person pursuing arete is always in tension with the status quo, because the status quo is always trying to convince them that they have done enough, that the external markers are sufficient, that the visible accomplishment is the real thing. Arete says: go deeper. The world says: that is deep enough.

This is where the death of the art becomes visible in philosophical terms. The practice stops demanding arete and starts rewarding compliance with thinner forms of success. It says, in effect: just get better at the visible part. Just win. Just perform. Just rise. Just become recognisable inside the accepted hierarchy. The practitioner may become highly efficient, but efficiency alone is a desperately poor substitute for excellence in the fuller sense. A sword can be efficient. A machine can be efficient. A mercenary can be efficient. Art asks more.

It asks for self-encounter.

It asks for the courage to let training expose not only weakness in the body but falsehood in the self. It asks whether the aggression rising in sparring belongs only to the moment or to something deeper one keeps carrying into every room. It asks whether one's hunger to win is clean or infected with fear, vanity, and old humiliation. It asks whether repeated practice is making one gentler or merely more defended, more stable or merely more rigid, more honest or simply more skilled at

hiding inside a role. The modern practitioner can avoid these questions for a very long time if the culture around them keeps rewarding external markers alone. But they are the questions that keep the art alive. They are the spiritual exercises that Hadot was pointing toward. They are the self-examination that Socrates insisted was the only thing that made life worth living. Without them, the dojo becomes a workshop for better mercenaries.

I use that word deliberately. It is one of the most important distinctions in this book.

A mercenary is not simply someone who fights for money. He is someone whose skill has been detached from a deeper ordering of the soul. He has force without higher allegiance. He can be brave, effective, even outwardly disciplined, but the centre is missing. Power is available, but it has not been brought under wisdom. His strength serves whatever pays, whatever rewards, whatever the market currently values. He is, in the deepest sense, for hire, not because he lacks courage but because his courage has no ground beneath it other than personal advantage.

The boys I feared on the streets of Johannesburg were not warriors. They were mercenaries in the making. Hungry for dominance. Ready to crush anyone in their path in order to climb the only hierarchy their environment offered them: the hierarchy of fear. They were dangerous, some of them terrifyingly so, but they had no freedom. They were completely determined by the culture that produced them. Their violence was not an expression of selfhood. It was an expression of the system's logic, internalised so completely that they believed it was their own.

The same distinction applies, I believe, inside modern martial arts. One can train hard, fight well, accumulate credentials, and still remain fundamentally mercenary if the art has been severed from transformation. The modern martial mercenary looks impressive. His technique may be impeccable. His conditioning may be

extraordinary. His competitive record may be beyond reproach. But if the practice has never demanded of him anything beyond physical performance, if it has never required him to examine his relationship to power, to vulnerability, to fear, to ego, to the people around him, then he remains half-formed. He has the martial. He does not have the art. He has the instrument. He has not undergone the formation.

That is the danger. And it becomes more dangerous when cloaked in the symbolism of tradition, because then people feel immune from the criticism. They believe that the bow, the terminology, the lineage, the old photographs on the wall, the Japanese or Chinese words, the references to warrior codes and ancient masters, all of this guarantees depth. It does not. Tradition can carry wisdom, and I respect lineage when it is genuine, but tradition can also be used as camouflage. A school may inherit the outer shell of older forms while reproducing modern emptiness inside them. Philosophy gets reduced to sayings on the wall. Ritual gets reduced to atmospheric staging. History gets reduced to ornament. The deeper demand of the path, to become someone genuinely different in relation to power, fear, self, and life, gets quietly displaced by the easier rewards of hierarchy and performance.

Confucius saw this danger more than two thousand years ago. He warned repeatedly against the substitution of ritual form for genuine virtue, against the person who performs the ceremonies perfectly but has no ren, no humaneness, no genuine moral feeling animating the performance. "If a man has no ren," Confucius asked, "what has he to do with ritual? If a man has no ren, what has he to do with music?" The question applies with devastating force to modern martial arts. If a practitioner has no genuine philosophical depth, no ongoing work of self-formation, no honest engagement with the harder questions of what their training is making them as a human being, then what do they have to do with the word "art"? What do they have to

do with the symbols of tradition they display? They have the form. They are missing the substance. They are performing a ceremony they do not understand.

This is why living philosophy matters so much in martial arts. Not philosophy as an intellectual add-on. Not philosophy as a marketing angle for schools that want to seem deeper than their competitors. Not philosophy as quotations from Musashi printed on gym t-shirts. Living philosophy. Philosophy as Hadot meant it: a set of practices that transform the practitioner's relationship to themselves, to their fear, to their power, and to the question of how to live. The old wisdom traditions, Eastern and Western alike, were not interested merely in producing men who could execute well. They were interested in what sort of life such execution ought to serve. They understood that technique without inner order becomes dangerous and spiritually empty. They understood that power without moral and existential development leaves a person fundamentally unfinished, regardless of how many belts hang in their wardrobe. They understood that the art was not complete unless it shaped the one who practised it.

That is the line I want to recover. And I want to be precise about what recovering it does and does not mean.

It does not mean making martial arts soft. It means making it whole. It does not mean abandoning the body. It means refusing to reduce everything to the body. It does not mean retreating from pressure. It means asking what pressure is actually for. It does not mean dismissing fighting. It means insisting that fighting is not the whole meaning of the path.

Because once you understand martial ART in that fuller sense, everything on the training floor shifts.

A drill is no longer just a drill. It becomes a way of observing what you do under difficulty, what rises in you when things go wrong, whether your response comes from presence or from panic. Sparring is no longer only a competitive exchange. It becomes a laboratory of presence, ego, fear, timing, restraint, and relational truth, a place where two human beings can test not only their techniques but their characters against the reality of each other. Partner work is no longer mere technical rehearsal. It becomes an exercise in trust, listening, adaptation, and mutual development. Solo practice stops being empty repetition and starts becoming what the contemplative traditions have always known it to be: a form of moving meditation, a way of integrating body, mind, and spirit in a single disciplined act of attention.

This is not mystical nonsense. It is the art returned to itself.

It is what happens when the path is no longer approached as a commodity. The question stops being "What can I get from this?" and becomes "What can this make of me?" That shift is everything. It moves the practitioner from consumer to participant, from accumulator to artist, from climber to pilgrim. It changes the emotional tone of the entire dojo. The room no longer needs to be organised around external proving because the deeper work has become visible again, valued again, demanded again. The strongest person in the room is no longer simply the one who can dominate everyone else. It may be the one most able to remain calm, generous, honest, and awake under pressure. It may be the one who helps a newer student find their composure rather than crushing them to confirm their own. It may be the one who trains with the kind of quiet intensity that comes not from the need to be seen but from the desire to be shaped. That is a different hierarchy altogether, and a far more demanding one.

I do not pretend it is easy to build such a culture now.

The age is too powerful for that to happen by accident. Every force around us pushes toward commodification, image, outcome, comparison, and spectacle. Heidegger warned that *Gestell* does not present itself as a choice. It presents itself as the only way of seeing. That is its danger. A martial school that wants to preserve the art must therefore become deliberately and consciously countercultural. Not countercultural as a brand. Not countercultural as an aesthetic. Countercultural as a commitment. It must know what it is refusing. It must know that it is fighting on two fronts: against external violence perhaps, but also against the subtler and more pervasive violence of a civilisation that wants to turn every practice into product and every person into a visible performer of worth.

That is why reclaiming the art is not nostalgia. It is rebellion.

Not rebellion as posture, but rebellion as fidelity. Fidelity to the deeper truth that martial practice was never meant to be only a system for producing winners or keeping people safe. It was meant to be one of the great paths of human formation. One of the places where a person could confront fear, pride, pain, limitation, and power in a way that made them more awake, more proportionate, more responsible, and more free. When that purpose is lost, the art dies even if the institution survives. When that purpose is remembered and genuinely practised, the path becomes dangerous again, not because it produces more violent people, but because it produces people who are less willing to accept the values of the age without question. People who have been shaped by something older, deeper, and more honest than the achievement society's definition of a worthwhile life.

Aristotle argued that every activity has its *telos*, its end or purpose, and that the excellence of any activity can only be judged in relation to that purpose. The *telos* of a knife is to cut, and a knife achieves excellence by cutting well. The *telos* of an eye

is to see, and an eye achieves excellence by seeing clearly. The question that modern martial arts must face, the question it has been avoiding for decades, is what is the telos of this practice? If the answer is "winning fights," then the practice will be judged by its capacity to produce winners, and everything else, including the formation of the practitioner as a human being, becomes secondary or irrelevant. If the answer is "self-defence," then the same narrowing occurs. If the answer is "fitness" or "discipline" or "confidence," the same.

But if the telos of martial arts is the formation of a complete human being, a person of arete, a person whose body, mind, and character have been shaped through disciplined practice into something more integrated, more courageous, more wise, and more free than they would otherwise have been, then the standard of excellence changes entirely. Then technique matters, but it matters as a means to a larger end. Then physical effectiveness matters, but it matters within a framework that includes moral seriousness, self-knowledge, and the capacity for peace. Then the practice becomes an art in the fullest sense: not merely a display of skill but a discipline of transformation, a way of life that demands everything the practitioner has and returns something that no amount of technique alone could ever provide.

That is where this chapter must leave us.

The art dies when it is reduced to utility, performance, and external markers. It revives when the practice once again becomes a vehicle of becoming, of self-creation, of living philosophy embodied under pressure. That revival will not happen through sentiment or marketing. It will not happen through better branding or kinder language or a slightly more enlightened version of the same performance. It will happen through a different type of practitioner: one willing to stand outside the

scripts of modern success and train not merely to fit the world better but to see through it more clearly.

That is where we turn next.

Because if the art is to live again, it will need a different kind of martial artist. Not a company man for the age. Not a mercenary in a gi. Not another polished vessel for modernity's hunger for spectacle. It will need the outsider, the rebel.

# Chapter 5: The Warrior as Renegade

The true martial artist has always been a problem for the world around him.

Not because he is antisocial in some shallow sense, and not because he enjoys rebellion for its own sake, but because he can no longer fully believe in the values that organise ordinary life. He sees too clearly what most people spend their lives trying not to see. He sees the emptiness beneath status. He sees how easily strength becomes theatre. He sees how quickly institutions turn living practices into systems of rank, obedience, and spectacle. He sees how modern culture rewards noise, comparison, domination, and performance, and then calls all of that success. And once you see that clearly enough, once the training has stripped away enough illusion, you cannot entirely fit back in. That is where the rebellion begins. It is not a pose. It is not a brand. It is a consequence of waking up.

The ancient Greeks had a word for this kind of person. They called him *atopos*, which means literally "out of place." Socrates was described this way by his contemporaries. He did not fit the available categories. He was not a politician, though he engaged with politics. He was not a priest, though he spoke of the divine. He was not a sophist, though he was more skilled in argument than any of them. He was *atopos*: uncategorisable, unsettling, impossible to absorb into the smooth functioning of Athenian social life. His students loved him precisely because he could not be placed. His enemies killed him for the same reason. A person who refuses the available roles, who cannot be slotted into the machinery, who keeps asking questions that the culture would prefer to leave unasked, is always dangerous. Not because he threatens

violence. Because he threatens the unexamined agreement that holds the whole performance together.

The martial artist, at his deepest, is atopus in exactly this sense. Or he should be.

This matters because the martial path, if it is alive at all, should produce exactly this kind of person. Not a man who conforms more elegantly. Not a better-trained vessel for the dominant values of the age. Not someone who can fight hard while still worshipping the same gods as everyone else: status, visibility, accumulation, and the relentless performance of worth. The true martial artist should be harder to absorb than that. He should be difficult for the age to use. He should resist its reduction of human value to measurable output. He should be capable of strength without worshipping force, capable of intensity without becoming addicted to domination, capable of skill without making skill the final measure of his life.

When I was a boy watching those old kung fu films, that quality was part of what reached me before I had any language for it. The heroes were not compelling only because they could fight. They were compelling because they stood against something. Corruption. Cowardice. Submission to false authority. Complicity with systems that ground people down and called it order. They lived by another measure. They could not be fully bought by the world around them. They trained alone or in hidden places, outside the mainstream, answerable to a teacher or a principle rather than to the crowd. At the time, I took that in mythically, as a child takes in any powerful story, through the gut rather than the intellect. Now I understand it more philosophically. The old martial hero mattered because he was not a company man. He was not for sale. He had found, through discipline, through suffering, through a training that cost him everything comfortable about his old life, a ground on which to stand that did not depend on the world's approval.

That spirit is exactly what modern martial arts has lost in too many places.

It has produced too many insiders. Too many men who speak of warrior values while conforming perfectly to the values of spectacle, hierarchy, branding, and performance. Too many teachers, influencers, fighters, and schools that look intense from the outside but are really just feeding people back into the same culture of comparison and validation that has hollowed out everything else. The language of the warrior survives. The substance has been replaced. What once meant "the one who stands outside" now too often means "the one who performs standing outside, for an audience, while remaining completely inside."

Nietzsche had a term for the thinker who stands against his own time. He called such a person "untimely," *unzeitgemäss*. In his *Untimely Meditations*, Nietzsche argued that the most important thinkers are always out of step with their era, not because they are behind it but because they see beyond it. The untimely person judges the present not by its own standards, which are always self-congratulatory, but by a standard that the present cannot yet recognise. He is uncomfortable company. He refuses the consolations that everyone around him has agreed to accept. He insists on asking questions that the age considers settled, or worse, irrelevant. And because of this, he is frequently dismissed, misunderstood, or treated as someone who has simply failed to keep up. In reality, he is the one who has gone further. He has seen through the shared illusion that everyone else mistakes for reality.

That is the renegade in martial arts. And I use the word renegade deliberately, with its full weight.

A renegade is not merely someone who disagrees. Disagreement is cheap. The internet is full of it. A renegade is someone who has broken with a system of belief, not from laziness or spite, but from an honest confrontation with its insufficiency. The

word comes from the Latin *renegare*, to deny, to renounce. It originally referred to someone who renounced a faith. There is something of that in what I am describing. The martial renegade has renounced the faith of modern martial arts culture, the unspoken creed that says your worth as a practitioner is determined by your belt, your record, your following, your brand, your ability to dominate, and your visibility within the hierarchy. He has looked at that creed, tested it against his own experience, and found it hollow. Not wrong in every particular, but hollow at the centre. It cannot answer the questions that matter most. It cannot tell you how to live. It cannot make you whole. It can only keep you performing.

That is why I keep using the word.

I do not mean renegade as vanity. I do not mean dressing differently, speaking in a more mystical register, or performing a kind of noble alienation for the camera. The world has plenty of that. The internet is full of men who have turned nonconformity into its own brand, who sell rebellion the way others sell supplements, who perform depth the way their competitors perform toughness. That is not what I am describing. I am describing someone who has become genuinely unwilling to let the culture tell him what strength is for. Someone who refuses to define himself by belts, medals, followers, or the fear he inspires in others. Someone whose worth no longer rises and falls with visible rank inside a system designed by people who may never have asked a serious question about what the practice is for.

Diogenes of Sinope, the most radical of the ancient Cynics, is perhaps the purest philosophical ancestor of this figure. Diogenes lived in Athens in the fourth century before Christ, and he was, by every conventional measure, a failure. He owned nothing. He slept in a large clay jar in the marketplace. He begged for food. He violated nearly every social convention that Athenian society held dear. And yet he

was one of the most famous men in the ancient world, because everyone who encountered him recognised, even if they hated him for it, that his freedom was real. Alexander the Great, arguably the most powerful man alive, reportedly visited Diogenes and asked if there was anything the philosopher wanted. Diogenes told him to step out of his sunlight. The story endures because it captures something essential about the renegade spirit. Here was a man who genuinely did not need what power offered. His training, his philosophical discipline, had freed him from the appetites that made other men controllable. He could not be bought because he did not want what was for sale.

I am not suggesting that martial artists should live in ceramic jars. Diogenes was an extreme, and extremes are instructive rather than imitative. But the principle he embodied is the one I want to recover for the martial path. The renegade is someone whose practice has freed him from the need for what the world is selling. Not from the world itself. From the need. That distinction is everything. He still lives in the world. He still trains within institutions. He still engages with people, with culture, with the messy reality of modern life. But he is no longer captured by its reward structure. He is no longer performing for its approval. He has found, through his practice, a ground beneath the ground that the culture provides, and he stands on it.

The true warrior has less and less need for the apparatus of recognition. He may still train hard, fight hard, teach hard truths, and live with severity where severity is needed. But his centre has shifted. He is not using the martial path to secure an identity. He is using it to strip one away. He is not trying to become more impressive. He is trying to become more free.

Freedom is the key word here, and it is almost universally misunderstood.

People think freedom means doing whatever one wants. Escaping structure. Living outside all obligation. Saying no to every form of discipline that feels restrictive. That is adolescent freedom, the freedom of the consumer who mistakes an abundance of choices for an abundance of meaning. The martial path has no interest in that. If anything, it teaches the opposite: that genuine freedom only becomes possible through discipline, constraint, and the willingness to submit to something more demanding than your own preferences.

The Stoics understood this with characteristic precision. Epictetus, himself a former slave, argued that true freedom has nothing to do with external circumstance and everything to do with the governance of one's own mind. A person in chains who has mastered his responses to the world is freer than a king who is enslaved by his appetites, his fears, and his need for the approval of others. Freedom, for the Stoics, was not the absence of limitation. It was the presence of inner sovereignty: the capacity to act from one's own reasoned judgment rather than being pushed and pulled by forces, external and internal, that one has never examined.

The freedom I am describing for the martial renegade is closer to the Stoic vision than to anything the modern world typically means by the word. It is freedom from unconscious compulsion. Freedom from the need to be seen a certain way. Freedom from fear disguised as ambition. Freedom from the modern script that says your life only counts if it is visible, measurable, and externally affirmed. Freedom from the quiet desperation of using every training session, every sparring round, every belt, every competition, as evidence in the ongoing trial of your own adequacy. That is the renegade's freedom, and it is far rarer than the performance culture of modern martial arts would like anyone to believe.

I think this is why the renegade often walks a lonely path for a time. Not because solitude is automatically noble, and not because one should wear loneliness like a badge of honour, but because once you stop believing in the usual markers of worth, you inevitably become harder for the ordinary tribe to read. The insider understands rank. He understands trophies, followers, titles, hierarchies, gym status, public recognition. He knows how to place people inside those systems. But what does he do with the man who trains seriously and does not seem hypnotised by the same rewards? What does he do with the man who has skill and can fight but is no longer interested in the endless performance of being the warrior? Usually he misunderstands him. Sometimes he dismisses him. Sometimes he suspects the man has lost his edge, gone soft, or become too philosophical for his own good. In truth, the opposite may be happening. The man may be recovering his soul.

Kierkegaard described a figure he called the "knight of faith," a person who lives in the ordinary world, looks like everyone else, and yet inhabits an entirely different interior reality. The knight of faith has passed through the deepest renunciation, has given up every attachment to worldly outcomes, and has come out the other side into a strange, quiet freedom that is invisible to those around him. He goes to work. He eats dinner with his family. He looks entirely unremarkable. But inside, he has made a movement that most people never make: he has ceased to depend on the world's validation for his sense of self. He acts from a ground that is not provided by the culture, and because of this, he is genuinely free in a way that the people around him, who are still performing, still comparing, still anxiously measuring themselves against one another, simply are not.

I think there is something of the knight of faith in the martial renegade, though the renegade's path runs through the body rather than through theological abstraction. He

is the person who has trained long enough and honestly enough to stop needing what the martial arts industry is selling. He does not need the next belt to feel legitimate. He does not need the next win to feel worthy. He does not need the next seminar, the next certification, the next social media milestone to feel that his practice has meaning. The meaning is in the practice itself, in the daily discipline of showing up, of confronting what rises in him under pressure, of choosing honesty over performance, of allowing the training to keep shaping him in ways that are not always comfortable and are rarely visible to anyone but himself.

That recovery of inner sovereignty requires a form of rebellion, but it is not the rebellion most people imagine.

It is not rebellion against discipline. The renegade may be the most disciplined person in the room. It is not rebellion against hard training. He may train with an intensity that would break practitioners who are younger, fitter, and more athletically gifted. It is not rebellion against lineage, standards, or seriousness. He may honour the tradition more deeply than anyone around him precisely because he understands what it was originally trying to accomplish. The rebellion is against the reduction of the path. Against the pressure to make martial arts another marketplace of external worth. Against the idea that the point of training is to become a more polished participant in the dominant culture's obsession with success, productivity, and spectacle.

Camus, whose rebel we encountered in the first chapter of this book, was careful to distinguish the rebel from the revolutionary. The revolutionary wants to replace one system of power with another. He has a programme, a plan, a new order waiting in the wings. The rebel is different. The rebel does not offer a utopia. He offers a refusal. He draws a line. He says: this far, and no further. I will not reduce myself to what this system demands. I will not pretend that the values being imposed on me are my own.

I will not participate in the degradation of what I know to be meaningful, even if refusing costs me status, belonging, and the comfort of fitting in. The rebel's no is not nihilism. It is the fiercest form of affirmation, because it affirms the existence of a standard higher than the one the world is offering.

That is the rebellion I am calling for.

It has to begin inside the practitioner before it can mean anything in the world. And it has to begin with the most uncomfortable recognition of all: that the conditioning lives in you too. The renegade does not stand outside the culture by virtue of some inherent purity. He is not immune to vanity, to the hunger for recognition, to the pull of status, to the seductive warmth of being admired. He has all of that in him because the culture that produced those appetites produced him, too. What makes him a renegade is not that he is free from the conditioning. It is that he has chosen to fight it. Consciously. Daily. On the mat and off it. He has made the inner battle his primary battle, and in doing so, he has recovered something that the modern martial arts world has almost entirely forgotten: the understanding that the real combat is not with the opponent but with the self that wants to be consumed by the same forces the training was supposed to liberate him from.

Foucault, in his late lectures at the Collège de France, became fascinated by an ancient Greek concept called parrhesia: fearless speech, or more precisely, the courage to speak the truth at personal risk. The parrhesiastes was someone who told the truth not because it was safe or advantageous but because it needed to be said, even when saying it endangered his position, his relationships, or his life. Foucault traced parrhesia through ancient philosophy and saw it as a practice of the self, a discipline through which a person demonstrated their freedom by refusing to let fear determine what they would and would not say. The parrhesiastes was dangerous

precisely because he could not be controlled by the usual mechanisms: flattery, threat, social pressure, or the desire for approval. His commitment to truth had made him ungovernable.

The martial renegade practises a form of parrhesia with his entire life. Not just with his words but with his body, his training, his refusal to participate in the comfortable fictions of modern martial arts culture. Every time he steps on the mat and chooses presence over performance, he is practising parrhesia. Every time he refuses to use aggression as ego gratification, he is practising parrhesia. Every time he helps a weaker partner grow rather than crushing them for the satisfaction of dominance, he is practising parrhesia. Every time he admits that he is afraid, uncertain, struggling, or lost, in a culture that equates vulnerability with weakness, he is practising parrhesia. His truth-telling is not verbal. It is embodied. It is lived. And it is more threatening to the status quo than any amount of philosophical rhetoric, because it demonstrates that a different way of being on the mat, and in the world, is actually possible.

This is also why the renegade is not merely an individual figure. He points toward a different kind of brotherhood.

One of the things I have come to understand most painfully over my decades in martial arts is that what passes for community in most training environments is a thin substitute for what human beings actually need. We call it brotherhood, but in too many places, what we really have is conditional belonging inside a hierarchy of value. You belong as long as you perform. You are respected as long as you are useful. You are included as long as you do not threaten the structure. The moment you fail visibly, question the culture, challenge the coach's authority, or simply stop performing at the expected level, the "brotherhood" reveals itself for what it was: a social contract based on mutual utility, dressed in the language of loyalty.

Genuine brotherhood, the kind that actually sustains human beings through the hardest passages of life, requires something entirely different. It requires what the Greeks called *philia*, a deep mutual regard rooted not in what someone can do for you but in who they are becoming. It requires honesty that is not punished. Vulnerability that is not exploited. Disagreement that does not result in exile. It requires men who are secure enough in themselves that they do not need to keep others beneath them in order to feel adequate. It requires, in short, exactly the qualities that the renegade's path cultivates: inner sovereignty, honesty, the capacity to face oneself without flinching, and the willingness to extend to others the same fierce compassion that one is learning to extend to oneself.

What we need is not another tournament or another televised spectacle. We need a brotherhood of renegades. Men who refuse to measure their worth by the same metrics that are making modern life sick. Men who have stopped competing with each other for position inside a hierarchy that does not deserve their loyalty and have started standing together in the harder, quieter work of becoming more fully human. Men who understand that the age keeps them comparing precisely because comparison kills solidarity before it can begin. Gym against gym. Style against style. Tribe against tribe. Everyone caught in the arithmetic of status. Everyone performing strength. Nobody learning trust.

Martial arts should be one of the last places on earth where that arithmetic holds absolute power. It should be one of the places where men learn not only how to stand their ground but how to stand together. Not around shared vanity. Not around team identity alone. Not around a common enemy. Around a shared commitment to something deeper: the understanding that strength without brotherhood becomes another lonely performance, and that the path was never meant to be walked alone.

Aristotle's vision of virtue friendship, which we encountered earlier, finds its fullest expression here. The brotherhood of renegades is a community of virtue friendship: men bound together not by utility or pleasure but by a shared commitment to becoming better human beings, who hold one another accountable not to external standards of performance but to the internal standard of honest, ongoing transformation. That kind of community is rare. It is demanding. It requires more courage than any sparring round. And it is worth more than every trophy, every title, and every belt that the modern martial arts industry has ever produced, because it addresses the one thing that none of those external markers can touch: the loneliness of a human being who has been performing strength for so long that he has forgotten what it feels like to be genuinely known.

That kind of brotherhood is a direct threat to the wider culture. And it should be.

Because the wider culture benefits from isolation. It benefits from men who are privately frightened and publicly posturing. It benefits from anxiety-driven performance. It benefits from tribes that remain at war with one another over symbols while no one asks what sort of human beings are actually being produced inside those tribes. The system does not fear your toughness. It domesticates it. It puts it in an octagon, gives it a highlight reel, and sells it back to you as evidence that the system works. What the system fears is solidarity. What it fears is men who have stopped competing with each other and started seeing each other clearly. What it fears is the renegade who has discovered that the greatest strength is not the capacity to dominate but the capacity to stand with others in truth.

This is where the renegade becomes a genuinely philosophical figure.

He is not simply a rebel against schools, institutions, or trends. He is a rebel against false pictures of what a human being is for. Against the anthropology that says man is

fundamentally a competitor, a consumer, a performer, a brand. Against any arrangement, whether social, martial, or economic, that teaches men to equate worth with conquest, identity with performance, and strength with the capacity to dominate. He stands against those pictures first in himself, because that is where the conditioning lives most deeply and most silently, and then in the culture around him through the way he trains, teaches, and lives.

And this is why the renegade is not an escapist.

He does not flee the world because it is compromised. He trains inside it. He works inside it. He often teaches inside it. But he sees through it. He is not naïve enough to imagine he can float above modernity untouched by its influence. He knows the poison runs through him, too. He knows he carries his own vanity, his own fear, his own hunger for validation, his own attraction to the stage. That is what makes his rebellion credible. It is not staged from a position of innocence or superiority. It is fought from within entanglement. He is not the pure critic standing above the fray. He is the man in the arena who has recognised that the arena itself may be designed to keep him from asking the only questions that could set him free.

Marcus Aurelius, the Stoic emperor who wrote his *Meditations* not as a public document but as private reminders to himself during military campaigns, understood this perfectly. He was the most powerful man in the Roman world, sitting at the apex of every hierarchy, and yet his journals are filled with the same struggle: how to remain honest when the world rewards dishonesty, how to remain humble when the world worships power, how to remember your own mortality when everyone around you is trying to make you feel immortal, how to keep the inner work going when the outer world provides every possible excuse to stop. Aurelius was an insider by every external measure. Inwardly, he was a renegade. He refused to let power tell him who

he was. He refused to let the empire's values replace his own. He kept returning, in private, to the harder questions, the ones that no amount of imperial success could answer: What kind of man am I becoming? Am I living in accordance with my own nature? Am I free, or am I merely powerful?

That is the severity the renegade brings back into martial arts. Not harshness for its own sake. Severity in the older sense: the willingness to tell the truth without flinching and to refuse soft collusion with falsehood. He is severe with himself first. He does not let training become a cover story for unexamined ambition. He does not let "warrior" become a brand. He does not let the language of self-mastery disguise a life still organised around external validation. He keeps asking the harder question, the one that the achievement society would prefer he never ask: What is this path making of me? Am I becoming more calm, more honest, more free, more useful to the people around me? Or am I simply becoming more polished in the old addiction to proving?

That question should haunt every serious martial artist. Because until it does, the path remains vulnerable to capture. One can train for decades and never really leave the stage. One can become highly skilled and inwardly unformed. One can even speak philosophy fluently while living by the same old metrics of status, ego, and spectacle. The renegade refuses that split. He knows the art is either changing the quality of his being or it is becoming another costume. And he would rather walk the path honestly, with all its difficulty and all its loneliness, than spend another year performing a version of strength that he knows, in the quiet hours, is hollow.

The martial renegade is the beating heart of this book. He is the figure everything has been building toward. Not because he is the final answer. He is not. He is a question

that keeps asking itself. But he is the question that modern martial arts most urgently needs to hear.

The warrior path was never meant to fit neatly into society. It was never meant to produce men who were more efficient servants of a sick civilisation. It was meant to produce men who were awake enough to see the sickness, honest enough to name it, disciplined enough to resist it in themselves, and brave enough to live differently even when the culture punished them for it. That is what the old films showed me before I had words for any of it. That is what my sensei was trying to teach me on that cold dojo floor. That is what the training, when it is real, when it is honest, when it is art and not merely martial athletics, has always been pointing toward.

The renegade is not the end of this story. He is the beginning of a different one.

Because once you see the stage clearly, once you grieve the death of the art honestly, once you recover the renegade spirit within yourself, the next question is no longer merely what you oppose. The next question is what you build. What kind of practice, what kind of dojo, what kind of brotherhood, what kind of training life actually helps produce this more awake, more human, less captive martial artist? What does the path look like when the art is alive again?

# Chapter 6: The Inner Dojo

If the true martial artist is a renegade, viewed as a trailblazer, rebel, or innovator, operating outside accepted boundaries to challenge the status quo, then the next question becomes unavoidable. Where, exactly, is the real work taking place?

Not only on the mat, though it certainly begins there. Not only in the body, though the body remains one of its primary instruments. Not only in the visible exchange between training partners, opponents, teachers, and students. The deeper work takes place in a chamber that most modern martial arts barely acknowledge, even while everything important depends on it. It takes place in the inner dojo.

I do not mean that in a sentimental way. I do not mean some vague mystical interiority detached from hard training. I mean something more exact. I mean the place in which a person's motives, fears, habits, narratives, pride, insecurity, aggression, tenderness, patience, and capacity for presence are brought into view through physical training and forced into relationship with reality. The inner dojo is not an alternative to the outer dojo. It is the deeper dimension of physical practice when that practice is no longer reduced to surface function alone. It is what opens when you stop treating the mat as merely a place to sharpen technique and begin treating it as a place to encounter yourself.

The Stoics had a name for this kind of practice. They called it *prosoche*: attention to oneself. It was considered the foundational spiritual exercise, the one upon which all other exercises depended. *Prosoche* was not introspection in the modern therapeutic sense, a passive turning inward to examine feelings. It was an active, vigilant, moment-by-moment discipline of self-observation. The Stoic practitioner cultivated

the ability to watch his own responses as they arose, to catch the first movements of anger, fear, vanity, and desire before they hardened into action, and to ask, in real time, whether those movements were in accordance with his deepest values or merely reflexive expressions of conditioning. Marcus Aurelius practised *prosoche*. Epictetus taught it as the first discipline of freedom. Seneca structured his entire evening routine around it, reviewing each day's responses with the severity of a judge who happened to be sitting inside his own mind.

What strikes me is that the training floor, when it is held within the right framework, is one of the most powerful environments for *prosoche* that has ever existed. Under pressure, a great deal of social performance falls away. The body tightens. The breath changes. The mind speeds up or freezes. Pride flares. Fear becomes visible. Control becomes more difficult. The self that appears there, in the heat of a hard round, in the confusion of an unexpected technique, in the moment when composure slips and something rawer takes its place, is often closer to the truth than the self presented in any other context. That is why sparring, drilling, conditioning, and live exchange can be so extraordinarily valuable when held inside a larger philosophical frame. They are not only tests of skill. They are disclosures. They reveal who you actually are when certainty leaves the room.

Do you become hurried? Rigid? Angry? Hyper-competitive? Performative? Do you disappear into self-protection? Do you dominate because you are scared of being dominated? Do you become reckless in order to avoid feeling exposed? Do you collapse inward and lose all composure the moment control slips? Do you reach for aggression the way a drowning man reaches for anything solid? These are not side issues. They are the heart of the matter. They reveal what sort of person is being

formed through the practice, and they cannot be hidden from anyone who is paying the right kind of attention, least of all from yourself.

For years, I did not have the language to think this way, though the evidence was in front of me every session.

I saw aggression on the mat that did not belong only to the drill. I saw men whose need to win felt too loaded for the context, too heavy with something that had nothing to do with the sparring round and everything to do with older, unmetabolised wounds. I saw my own body bring a fighter's intensity into moments that did not require it. The story I told in the second chapter, about responding to a minor professional disagreement with the same intensity I would bring to a physical confrontation, was not an isolated incident. It was a pattern. And it showed me exactly what combat-only training does when it is never integrated with deeper self-awareness. It does not stay politely inside the gym. It leaks into the rest of life. The same patterns trained on the mat begin shaping conversation, conflict, intimacy, and perception itself. Every problem starts looking like a fight. Every exchange begins to carry the weight of threat. The nervous system remains perpetually primed for a confrontation that may never actually arrive. What should have been a tool for navigating difficulty becomes a lens that distorts everything into the shape of combat.

That is not inner mastery. It is conditioning without wisdom.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the French phenomenologist, spent his career arguing that consciousness is not something that happens in the head and then gets expressed through the body. Consciousness is bodily. We do not have bodies that we then use as instruments. We are our bodies. Perception, emotion, thought, and action are not separate processes happening in different departments. They are unified expressions of a single embodied being. What this means for martial arts is profound: when you

train the body, you are not merely training a physical mechanism. You are training the whole person. Every repetition, every drill, every sparring round is shaping not just muscular memory but emotional patterns, perceptual habits, and ways of being in the world. The fighter who trains for years in an atmosphere of aggression and dominance does not leave those patterns on the mat when he showers and goes home. They are in him. They are him. His body has become a certain kind of instrument, tuned to a certain frequency, and that frequency plays in every room he enters.

Merleau-Ponty would not have been surprised by anything I have described. If the body is the primary site of selfhood, then what you do with it repeatedly, under conditions of intensity and stress, is quite literally who you become. This is why the inner dojo matters so much. It asks a deeper question of training than the technical question alone can ever pose. Not simply: can you impose your will under pressure? But: what sort of inner posture is being reinforced every time pressure arrives? Is the mat making you calmer or merely more dangerous? More proportionate or merely more intense? More awake or merely more skilled at enforcing your patterns? More free, or more deeply grooved into the same reactive channels that have been running your life since before you ever stepped onto a training floor?

The modern martial arts world is saturated with answers to the technical question. There is no shortage of content, systems, breakdowns, sequencing, and endless debate about what works against what, under which conditions, in which ruleset. What is vanishingly rare is the serious cultivation of the inner dojo. The place where training becomes an encounter with one's own fear, ego, shame, impatience, pride, and compulsive need to dominate. The place where the most significant conflicts are recognised as being not with external opponents but with one's own patterns, attachments, and limitations. The place where every sparring session, every technique

practice, becomes an opportunity to observe and work with internal states rather than merely to produce external results.

Hadot would have recognised this immediately. His life's work was the recovery of precisely this dimension of ancient philosophy: the understanding that the point of any genuine discipline is not the accumulation of knowledge or skill but the transformation of the practitioner. The Stoic exercises, the Epicurean practices of attention, the Cynic disciplines of voluntary hardship, all of these were designed not to make people more clever but to make them more free, more present, more able to respond to life from a place of settled composure rather than from the turbulence of unexamined reaction. *When Hadot described philosophy as a way of life, he meant that every moment of practice was simultaneously a moment of self-formation. The exercise was not preparation for the real thing. The exercise was the real thing. The practice was the philosophy.*

Martial arts, in its deepest expression, works exactly the same way. The technique is not the preliminary to some later, higher practice. The technique, practised with full attention, under real pressure, with honest self-observation, is itself the site of transformation. The drill is the spiritual exercise. The round is the meditation. The moment of fear, if met with awareness rather than mere reactivity, is the philosophical encounter. Everything depends on the quality of attention brought to what is already happening on the training floor.

What interests me now, after a lifetime on the path, is not simply what a person can do under pressure, but who appears under pressure. Who are you when the composure breaks? Who are you when the technique fails? Who are you when someone better than you is applying relentless pressure and every instinct in your body is screaming for you to fight dirty, give up, or perform your way out of the

situation? That is where the inner dojo does its work. That is where the real self becomes visible. And that is where the deeper art either begins or is avoided for another day.

The mat, when it is functioning as a true dojo rather than as a stage, becomes a mirror.

A mirror can be uncomfortable. It does not flatter. It shows what is there. The impatient student sees his impatience reflected back at him in the way he rushes through drills, refuses to slow down, and treats every repetition as an obstacle between him and some imagined future competence rather than as a moment of practice complete in itself. The fearful student sees her fear in the way her breathing shallows, her body stiffens, and her movements become either frozen or frantically fast the moment genuine pressure enters the room. The dominant student sees how quickly he reaches for force to resolve situations that could be handled with timing, sensitivity, or restraint, and if he is honest, he begins to wonder whether the force is serving the training or serving something else, something older and less examined. The fragile ego sees how badly it needs to win every exchange, how a single moment of being outmanoeuvred produces a disproportionate internal crisis, how the need to be seen as competent has become so consuming that it distorts the entire experience of training. The people-pleaser sees where they collapse under pressure, abandoning their own structure in order to avoid any possibility of conflict, even the structured and consensual conflict that training is designed to provide. The avoidant person sees where they disappear, going limp, going passive, mentally leaving the room the moment things become genuinely uncomfortable.

The inner dojo begins the moment a person stops treating these revelations as interruptions to the real training and starts recognising them as the deepest training there is.

That is a massive shift. Most people never make it. Most training environments never ask them to.

Because once that shift happens, the entire meaning of practice changes. A drill is no longer only repetition. It becomes a form of self-observation in motion. Sparring is no longer merely a competitive proving ground. It becomes an exploration of fear, composure, timing, emotional regulation, and the capacity to find freedom within constraint. It becomes, at its best, a conversation through movement, an exchange in which both people are simultaneously testing their technique and testing their character, and in which victory and defeat become less important than the quality of the exchange itself. The best sparring sessions I have experienced in nearly five decades on the mat were not the ones I won most decisively. They were the ones in which both my partner and I grew, in which something honest passed between us, in which the exchange revealed something about both of us that we could not have discovered alone.

That is inner dojo language. It means the session is no longer there merely to establish who is superior. It is there to reveal and refine how each person meets the moment.

Even solo practice transforms under this frame.

A form, a round of shadow boxing, a sequence of movements repeated in silence, a breath pattern held under discomfort, all of these can become exercises in the practice of returning to attention. The body becomes the site of gathered presence rather than

mere repetition. A strike is not just a strike. It becomes an expression of whether body and mind are unified or scattered. A stance reveals whether one is genuinely rooted or merely posing. The rhythm of a combination reveals whether one is present or merely going through the motions while the mind is elsewhere, planning, worrying, rehearsing tomorrow's problems. Breath reveals whether one is in relationship with the present moment or merely enduring it until something more interesting arrives.

The Japanese martial traditions had a concept for this quality of presence: *mushin*, which translates roughly as "no-mind." It is one of the most misunderstood ideas in martial arts, largely because the English approximation makes it sound like the practitioner is supposed to stop thinking altogether, to become some kind of empty automaton executing techniques from a void. That is not what *mushin* means. *Mushin* is the state in which the mind has become so completely absorbed in the present moment that the usual interference of ego, calculation, fear, and self-conscious monitoring drops away. It is not thoughtlessness. It is thought so fully integrated with action that the division between the two dissolves. The practitioner does not think about the technique and then execute it. Perception and response become a single movement. There is no gap between seeing and acting, no space for the ego to insert itself and begin managing, performing, or protecting.

*Mushin* is not something that can be achieved by trying to achieve it. That is the paradox. The harder you try to reach *mushin*, the more self-conscious effort you introduce, and self-conscious effort is precisely what *mushin* is the absence of. It arises as a byproduct of sustained, honest, attentive practice over long periods of time. It is what happens when the body has been trained thoroughly enough and the inner work has gone deep enough that the practitioner can finally get out of their own way. In that sense, *mushin* is perhaps the highest expression of the inner dojo: the

point at which the inner work has become so complete that it no longer needs to be performed as a separate activity. It has been integrated into the movement itself. The meditation and the technique have become one thing.

But very few practitioners ever reach that integration, and the reason is not that they lack talent or physical ability. The reason is that the inner dojo, the dimension of practice where that integration is cultivated, has been almost entirely neglected in modern martial arts training. We have become extraordinarily sophisticated in our technical instruction. We can break down a technique frame by frame. We can analyse biomechanics, timing, distance management, and tactical sequencing with a precision that would have astonished practitioners even a generation ago. But we have almost nothing to offer the student who comes to us and says: I am technically competent but I freeze under real pressure. Or: I can perform the technique in drills but something changes in me when I spar and I become someone I do not recognise. Or: I have been training for ten years and I am still ruled by the same fear that brought me to the mat in the first place. These are inner dojo problems. And most modern martial arts environments do not even have a framework for addressing them, let alone a methodology.

This is where breath becomes central to the practice, and not as a fashionable wellness add-on.

Breath is one of the first places where the truth shows up under pressure. Watch any practitioner in a hard round and you will see it: the moment fear arrives, the breath either stops or becomes rapid and shallow. The moment frustration builds, the breath tightens. The moment composure breaks, the breath follows, or more accurately, the breath often leads. The relationship between respiratory pattern and emotional state is not metaphorical. It is physiological. The autonomic nervous system, which governs

the body's stress responses, is directly modulated by the pattern, depth, and rhythm of breathing. This is not esoteric knowledge. It is basic physiology. And it means that the deliberate cultivation of breath control under pressure is not merely a relaxation technique. It is a practice of inner sovereignty. It teaches, at the most fundamental bodily level, that one need not be entirely governed by the first impulse of the system. One can feel fear and still breathe. One can feel aggression rise and still choose not to become its servant. One can remain in relationship with the moment rather than being hijacked by it.

That may be one of the deepest martial skills there is. It is also one of the oldest. Every serious martial tradition in history, from the breathing practices of Chinese internal arts to the respiratory disciplines of Indian martial systems to the emphasis on controlled exhalation in Japanese swordsmanship, has understood that mastery of the breath is inseparable from mastery of the self. The breath is the bridge between the voluntary and the involuntary, between what we can control and what normally controls us. When a practitioner learns to maintain deliberate, composed breathing under genuine pressure, they are not merely managing their physiology. They are practising freedom. They are demonstrating, in real time, that the reactive patterns of the nervous system are not destiny. They can be met, observed, and responded to rather than blindly obeyed.

And it transfers.

This is crucial, and it is the test of whether the inner dojo is genuine or merely decorative. If the inner work stays locked inside the gym, if it produces composure on the mat but leaves the rest of life untouched, then it is not yet deep enough. The real proof of the inner dojo is whether training alters how a person lives. Whether the composure cultivated under physical pressure begins to appear in the face of

emotional pressure, professional pressure, relational pressure. Whether the capacity to remain present during a hard round begins to show up during a hard conversation. Whether the willingness to face fear on the mat translates into a willingness to face fear in the rest of life: the fear of failure, the fear of rejection, the fear of vulnerability, the fear of being seen as something other than strong.

Aristotle's concept of phronesis, practical wisdom, is relevant here. Phronesis is not theoretical knowledge. It is not the ability to articulate ethical principles in the abstract. It is the ability to perceive what the situation actually requires and to respond appropriately, in real time, with all the complexity and ambiguity that real situations involve. A person with phronesis does not apply rules mechanically. They read the moment. They sense what is needed. They act with a kind of intelligence that cannot be reduced to any formula because it arises from the integration of experience, perception, and character. Phronesis is what you get when technique and wisdom have been practised together for long enough that they become inseparable.

The inner dojo, at its best, cultivates phronesis. Not just on the mat, where the ability to read a situation and respond with appropriate force, timing, and composure is obviously valuable, but in every domain of life. The practitioner who has spent years developing the capacity to remain present under pressure, to observe his own reactions without being consumed by them, to choose his response rather than merely defaulting to conditioning, carries that capacity with him everywhere. It changes how he handles conflict. It changes how he sits with uncertainty. It changes how he meets other people's fear, anger, and vulnerability without either collapsing into their emotional state or armouring against it. It makes him, in the fullest sense, more useful to the world around him. Not because he can fight. Because he can stay human when things get hard.

This is why the phrase I keep returning to is so important, and why I want it understood precisely: martial arts is not preparation for war. It is preparation for peace. Not the passive peace of avoidance. Not the fragile peace of the untested. Not the sentimental peace of someone who has never had to make a fist. The hard peace of someone who has encountered violence, fear, ego, and conflict in himself and in the world, who has trained honestly enough to know what he is capable of and what it costs, and who is therefore less likely to be unconsciously ruled by any of it. That kind of peace does not come from weakness. It comes from the deepest kind of strength: the strength of a person who no longer needs to prove that he is strong.

That is profoundly martial ART. And it is only accessible through the inner dojo.

The inner dojo, then, is not a retreat from seriousness. It is a deepening of seriousness beyond what most modern martial arts are willing to demand. It forces the practitioner to face questions that technique alone cannot answer. Why am I training? What part of me is driving this? What do I become when fear rises? Am I using skill to grow, or to avoid the growth that frightens me more than any opponent? Does this path make me more balanced, more compassionate, more wise, more useful to the people in my life? Or does it merely make me more formidable in a narrow context while leaving the deeper architecture of my character untouched?

These are not rhetorical questions. They are diagnostic instruments. They are the inner dojo's equivalent of a sparring round: tests that reveal the truth of your condition regardless of what story you are telling yourself. And without them, the practitioner easily drifts back into unconscious philosophy. The old assumptions return without announcement: winning validates my worth. Vulnerability is weakness. More dominance means more security. Hardness is freedom. These beliefs

do not need to be spoken to be operative. They can run silently beneath decades of training, shaping everything while remaining invisible to the person they are shaping.

This is also why the inner dojo requires honesty more than image.

A person can look very advanced externally and remain inwardly juvenile. They can speak about mindfulness, embodiment, integration, even spirit, while still using the path to prop up vanity, avoid tenderness, and secure identity. The inner dojo has no patience for that if it is functioning properly. It keeps asking what the practice is actually doing to you, not what story you tell about it. That is severe medicine, and many people prefer the stage because the stage is easier. The stage asks how you appear. The inner dojo asks how you are.

Simone Weil, whom we encountered earlier, wrote that attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity. She did not mean the scattered attention of the multitasker, nor the anxious attention of the person who is always scanning for danger. She meant the quality of presence that arises when a person stops performing and starts genuinely seeing what is in front of them. Weil believed that this quality of attention was the foundation of all genuine moral and spiritual life, because it is only when we truly attend to reality, rather than to our projections, our fears, and our desires, that we can respond to it with any kind of wisdom. The inner dojo demands exactly this quality of attention, directed not only outward toward the training partner or the technique but inward toward the practitioner's own responses, reactions, and patterns. It demands that you see yourself, not the version of yourself that you prefer, not the narrative you have constructed, but the actual self that appears when the pressure is real and the mirrors are honest.

I find the distinction between the stage and the inner dojo more and more decisive as the years accumulate.

Because there are only so many years a person can train before the deeper question starts pressing its way through all the technical noise. What is all this making of me? More whole, or more defended? More free, or more deeply controlled by forces I have never examined? More capable of genuine relationship, or more isolated inside a performance of capability? If a person never asks that question, they may become highly skilled and still miss the art entirely. If they do ask it, and keep asking it with the kind of honesty that does not flinch when the answer is uncomfortable, then even ordinary training begins to open into something extraordinary. It becomes a path toward what I think of as philosophical integration: the joining of combat effectiveness with ethical development, inner composure, wisdom, and a life that is genuinely worth living rather than merely impressively decorated.

I do not think this means every school must now become explicitly philosophical in its language. Not everyone needs the same vocabulary. Not everyone needs to quote the Stoics or reference Merleau-Ponty after class. Some of the deepest training environments I have seen in my life were not verbally sophisticated at all. But they carried a certain atmosphere that you could feel the moment you walked through the door. They trained hard. They told the truth. They did not worship ego. They did not reduce students to status tokens. They did not make competition the whole moral universe of the room. They built people, not just fighters. That, too, is inner dojo work, even if it is never named as such. The atmosphere of a room can do philosophical work that no lecture ever could, because it operates on the body, on the nervous system, on the habitual patterns of response that are far more powerful than any consciously held belief.

Still, I think we need the naming now. We need it because modernity is too strong for depth to survive unspoken.

If the philosophical dimension of martial arts is not consciously cultivated, if it is not deliberately protected, if it is not built into the structure of how people train and how teachers teach, then it will be swallowed by the forces we have already named: utility, spectacle, rank, and the relentless pressure to convert everything into measurable output. The inner dojo must be reclaimed on purpose. It must be created and sustained as a deliberate practice within the larger practice, not left to chance or to the occasional student who happens to stumble upon it on their own. Most modern martial arts environments support only technical development. Remarkably few offer anything resembling an integrated approach that connects physical training to the deeper work of philosophical and characterological formation. That absence is not a minor oversight. It is a fundamental failure, and it explains why so many technically proficient practitioners walk off the mat feeling, in the quiet hours, that something essential is still missing.

This is why this chapter is pivotal in the architecture of this book. It names the place where the art begins living again.

Not in the outer badges. Not in the mythology. Not in the brand, the aesthetic, or the cultural signifiers of rebellion. It begins where a practitioner starts using training to meet themselves more honestly than they have ever been met, and where a training environment begins creating the conditions for that honesty to deepen rather than be drowned out by performance. The inner dojo is where martial arts becomes once again a path of becoming rather than a system of accumulation. It is where the fighter who has done everything right by the external measures can finally begin the harder and more important work of becoming something rarer than a fighter: a more complete, more honest, more awake human being.

And once that possibility opens, another task becomes clear.

The inner dojo cannot remain merely individual. If it stays private, it remains fragile, always at risk of being overwhelmed by the surrounding culture the moment the practitioner steps back into a training environment that does not support the deeper work. If martial arts is to recover its soul, then whole communities of practice must be shaped differently. The culture of the training floor itself must begin to change. The brotherhood must be rebuilt on terms that honour the inner work rather than mocking it. Training must once again create not only harder men but more honest, more awake, and more genuinely useful human beings, and it must do so together, because the inner dojo, like every serious philosophical practice in history, reaches its fullest expression not in isolation but in community.

That is where we must go next.

# Chapter 7: Brotherhood Against the Machine

One of the great tragedies of modern life is that it has left men surrounded and alone at the same time.

They work beside one another, train beside one another, compete beside one another, scroll past one another, admire one another, envy one another, and yet rarely stand with one another in any deep sense. There is contact everywhere, but very little brotherhood. There is plenty of tribe, but not much fellowship. Plenty of noise, ritual, loyalty signalling, and posturing, but far less truth. Far less of that older and harder thing in which men are joined not by image, status, or shared enemies, but by a willingness to face themselves and the world honestly, together.

Martial arts should be one of the last places where that sort of brotherhood still survives.

And yet, in too many places, it does not.

Instead, the same sickness that runs through the rest of modern life simply shows up in another uniform. Gym against gym. Style against style. Team against team. Coach against coach. Fighter against fighter. Everyone measuring. Everyone comparing. Everyone, in one form or another, trying to establish where they stand in the pecking order. Who is tougher. Who is more dangerous. Who is more respected. Who matters more. That is not brotherhood, that's the dis-ease of the modern world.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, in one of his most famous and most difficult passages, described a dynamic he called the struggle for recognition. Two consciousnesses encounter each other, and each one needs the other to recognise it, to

confirm its existence, its worth, its reality. But the encounter immediately becomes a contest, because each consciousness can only feel fully real by being recognised by someone it considers an equal, and yet the drive for dominance threatens to destroy the very equality that would make the recognition meaningful. Hegel traced this dynamic through the relationship of master and slave, showing how the master's apparent victory actually undermines the recognition he sought: a slave's acknowledgment is worthless precisely because the slave has been reduced to a subordinate. The master wins the contest and loses the thing he was actually fighting for.

I think about Hegel's analysis every time I watch the status dynamics of a martial arts gym play out. Men enter the room needing something from each other that they rarely name: to be seen, to be recognised, to be confirmed as real and worthy and capable. That need is human and understandable. But the culture of the room typically channels that need into competition, into the endless sorting of who is above and who is below, and in doing so, it destroys the very thing everyone actually came for. The man who dominates the sparring round gets a momentary hit of recognition, but it is the recognition of someone he has just subordinated, which means it cannot truly satisfy. The man who is dominated feels diminished, which means he cannot offer genuine recognition to anyone. The whole room becomes Hegel's master-slave dialectic running on repeat, with belts, rankings, and sparring results serving as the currency of a transaction that can never actually close.

The tragedy is that many people cannot see the difference between this dynamic and genuine brotherhood.

They confuse intensity with depth. They confuse tribe with fellowship. They confuse shared aggression with belonging. They confuse the language of respect with the

reality of care. They think that because men sweat together, hit pads together, spar together, travel together, and sometimes bleed together, something deeper must automatically be taking place. Sometimes it is. Often it is not. Shared hardship can create bonds, but it can also create hierarchy, theatre, dependency, and a whole private economy of insecurity. Hard training by itself does not guarantee brotherhood any more than shared suffering guarantees friendship. In some places, training actually becomes the medium through which comparison, humiliation, and hidden resentment are most efficiently reinforced, because the physical encounter provides constant, undeniable, public data about where each person stands relative to everyone else.

This matters more than most martial artists realise.

Because if the dojo, the mat, cannot become a place of genuine brotherhood, then it simply becomes another site where modern loneliness gets acted out in the language of toughness. It becomes one more arena in which men who are privately uncertain of themselves seek worth through competition, status, rank, dominance, and the constant low-grade need to prove they are not the weak one in the room.

I know how subtle that can be because I have lived inside martial spaces for most of my life.

I know the good in them. I know the sincerity that exists there, the courage, the humour, the loyalty that can grow between people who have suffered honestly together. I have seen people carried by martial arts when they might otherwise have collapsed into chaos, addiction, drift, or despair. I have seen boys become steadier. I have seen men become more disciplined. I have seen frightened people discover that they were not as fragile as they had believed. I would never dismiss any of that. It is real, and some of it has saved lives, including, at various points, my own. But

because I know the good, I also know the distortions. I know how easily the room can become a stage for the same old human wound: the need to matter, to rise, to dominate, to belong through rank rather than through truth.

That is why I want to speak plainly here.

A martial school can be full of hard men and still be emotionally hollow. It can produce excellent fighters and still leave people inwardly lonely. It can talk about respect and still be organised by fear, status, and the compulsive need to perform strength. It can use the language of family and brotherhood while quietly teaching everyone that their worth rises or falls according to how they compare to the men around them.

That sort of culture may feel strong from the inside. In truth, it is brittle. And it is brittle because it is built on the wrong foundation.

Martin Buber, a philosopher who spent his life thinking about the nature of genuine human encounter, drew a distinction that I believe cuts to the heart of this problem. He distinguished between two fundamentally different ways of relating to another person. The first he called I-It: the stance in which the other person is an object, a thing to be used, measured, compared, categorised, or controlled. In the I-It relation, I do not encounter you as a whole, irreducible human being. I encounter you as a function. You are my training partner, which means you are a tool for my development. You are my competitor, which means you are an obstacle to my success. You are my student, which means you are a reflection of my teaching. You are my senior, which means you are a rung on the ladder above me. In every case, the other person has been reduced to a role within my private economy of need.

The second mode of relation Buber called I-Thou. In the I-Thou encounter, I do not relate to you as a function, a category, or a means to an end. I encounter you as a person. As a presence. As someone who is fully as real, as complex, as vulnerable, and as irreducible as I am. The I-Thou relation is not sentimental. It is not always pleasant. It can include conflict, disagreement, and hard truth. But it never reduces the other person to an instrument. It never forgets that they are there, in their full humanity, even when the interaction is difficult.

When I look at the dominant culture of modern martial arts through Buber's lens, what I see is a world almost entirely organised around the I-It relation. Training partners are obstacles, measuring sticks, or props in one's own narrative of progress. Opponents are problems to be solved. Students are products to be developed. Teachers are resources to be extracted from. Everyone is a function within someone else's system of need. The language of brotherhood persists, but the actual encounter between human beings, the moment of genuine I-Thou meeting in which two people recognise each other's full reality, is remarkably rare. It happens in flashes. It happens in the occasional moment after a hard round when both people know that something honest just passed between them. But the culture does not cultivate it. The culture cultivates the I-It relation, because the I-It relation is compatible with hierarchy, competition, and the endless sorting of human beings into categories of worth, while the I-Thou relation is compatible with none of those things.

Real brotherhood is not built on the I-It relation. It cannot be. You cannot genuinely stand with someone you are simultaneously using as a mirror for your own insecurity.

Real brotherhood is harder than that.

It asks something the age does not know how to give easily. It asks men to stop using one another as references for private status. It asks them to stop treating every

interaction as a referendum on worth. It asks them to stop building identity through comparison and start standing inside a more demanding form of relation. It asks them to train hard without making the whole point of training the endless proving of who belongs above whom. It asks them to enter the round as I-Thou rather than I-It, to encounter the training partner as a full human being engaged in a shared practice of becoming, not as an obstacle, a target, or a unit of measurement.

This is where modern martial arts faces a real choice. A choice it has been avoiding for a long time.

It can keep mirroring the wider culture, with all its obsession with status, validation, branding, and visible superiority, or it can become one of the last places where another order of masculine life is still possible. A place where challenge does not have to become humiliation. A place where seriousness does not have to become ego. A place where men are not merely sharpened against one another but strengthened through one another.

The difference between those two worlds is enormous. It is the difference between a factory and a forge.

In the first world, training becomes another machine for sorting men into winners and losers, alphas and lesser beings, those who matter and those who do not. Even where the surface looks respectful, the atmosphere remains anxious. Men are careful with one another, but not open. They are loyal, but conditionally. They may call each other brother, but the word is thin. It means tribe, rank, and mutual reinforcement. It does not mean: I am willing to see you clearly, tell you the truth, and stand with you in a way that does not depend on your usefulness to my self-image.

In the second world, challenge remains hard, standards remain high, and weakness is not romanticised, but the room serves something deeper than pecking order. Training partners are not merely obstacles against which to measure one's worth. They are fellow travellers. The round is not just a place to impose yourself. It is a place to learn, to reveal, to sharpen, and to grow in ways that no one could reach alone. The room becomes a site of mutual formation, not merely mutual testing.

That is the sort of brotherhood I believe martial arts should be building. Not soft. Not sentimental. Not vague. Not a refusal of edge. In fact, precisely the opposite. A harder brotherhood because it is less dependent on image. A harder brotherhood because it can survive honesty. A harder brotherhood because it does not need everyone to keep acting invulnerable in order for the whole thing to hold together.

Aristotle, as we have seen, distinguished three kinds of friendship: friendships of utility, friendships of pleasure, and friendships of virtue. Only the third, he believed, deserved the name friendship in the fullest sense. Friendships of utility dissolve the moment the usefulness ends. Friendships of pleasure dissolve the moment the shared enjoyment fades. But friendships of virtue endure because they are grounded in something that does not fluctuate with circumstance: a mutual commitment to the good, a shared recognition of each other's character, and a genuine desire to see the other person flourish, not because their flourishing serves you, but because you care about who they are becoming.

When Aristotle described the friend of virtue, he used a phrase that has always struck me as one of the most beautiful in all of philosophy: the friend is a "second self." Not a copy. Not a mirror. Not a tool. A second self: a person whose existence extends and deepens your own, whose growth enlarges rather than threatens you, whose honest perception of you serves as a kind of second conscience, helping you see what you

cannot see alone. This is not the friendship of the locker room, where men bond over shared intensity and then scatter the moment the shared intensity ends. This is something far more demanding and far more rare: a relationship in which two people are genuinely invested in each other's transformation.

I want to be honest about how seldom this actually appears in modern martial arts culture.

Most of what passes for friendship in training environments is utility friendship. I train with you because you are a useful partner. I am loyal to the gym because the gym serves my goals. I respect the coach because the coach improves my performance. Some of it is pleasure friendship: the shared excitement of training, the adrenaline bond, the post-session camaraderie. These are not nothing. They have genuine value. But they are not virtue friendship, and when they are mistaken for it, the result is a community that looks solid from the outside but fractures the moment genuine difficulty, disagreement, or vulnerability enters the room. The moment someone fails publicly, the utility friendship recalculates. The moment the pleasure fades, the pleasure friendship dissipates. Only the virtue friendship endures, because it was never dependent on the external circumstances in the first place.

Building a culture of virtue friendship in a martial arts environment is one of the hardest things a teacher can attempt. It is also one of the most important.

One of the reasons this matters so much now is that the modern world is desperately bad at giving men places where they can become fully human together.

There are still teams, companies, departments, online tribes, political camps, fan cultures, and little islands of belonging scattered across the landscape. But many of these are not really places of formation. They are places of alignment, performance,

and mutual reinforcement. You are accepted so long as you play the role, hold the line, wear the badge, say the right things, and keep the emotional range narrow enough not to disturb the machinery. This is true in the workplace. It is true online. It is true in much of public life. And it is true, increasingly, in martial arts.

Byung-Chul Han has described the contemporary condition as the "swarm": a form of social organisation in which people are connected digitally but disconnected existentially, linked by data but separated by the absence of any genuine encounter with the other. The swarm does not produce solidarity. It produces what Han calls "shitstorms": eruptions of collective outrage that mimic political action but produce nothing durable, no community, no commitment, no genuine standing-with. The swarm is the opposite of brotherhood. It is proximity without presence, contact without encounter, noise without conversation.

Martial arts should be the antidote to the swarm. It should be the place where men step out of the disembodied, mediated, performative world of screens and into the direct, embodied, unavoidable reality of another human being's presence. When you spar with someone, you are not interacting with their profile, their brand, or their curated image. You are meeting their body, their breath, their fear, their intelligence, their composure under pressure. There is nowhere to hide on the mat. The encounter is total. And it is precisely that totality, that impossibility of hiding, that makes martial arts uniquely suited to producing the kind of brotherhood that the digital age has almost completely destroyed.

But only if the culture of the room allows it. Only if the room values the encounter more than the ranking.

Emmanuel Levinas, the French-Lithuanian philosopher who survived the Holocaust and spent the rest of his life thinking about what it means to truly encounter another

person, argued that ethics begins in the face. Not in principles, not in rules, not in abstract systems of right and wrong, but in the direct, unmediated encounter with another human face. When I look at your face, Levinas argued, I encounter something that resists all my attempts to categorise, control, or reduce you. Your face makes a claim on me that precedes every calculation of advantage: the claim of your irreducible humanity, your vulnerability, your reality as a being that is not me, that I cannot possess, and that I am therefore responsible for in a way that no system of rankings or rewards can capture.

I think about Levinas every time I watch two people spar with genuine respect. Something happens in that exchange that no spectator can fully see. Two people are making themselves vulnerable to each other. They are trusting each other with their bodies, their pride, their composure, their dignity. They are asking each other, implicitly, to be both fierce and careful, to push without destroying, to challenge without humiliating. When that exchange is held with the right quality of attention, something very close to what Levinas described takes place: an encounter with the face of the other that goes deeper than any ranking system, deeper than any competitive result, and that creates a bond between the two people that is qualitatively different from anything that mere shared affiliation can produce.

That is where genuine martial brotherhood begins. Not in the locker room. Not in the team photo. Not in the matching gear or the shared allegiance to a brand. It begins in the moment when two people face each other on the mat and choose to be both honest and responsible with the encounter. It begins with the willingness to push someone hard while remaining genuinely concerned with their well-being. It begins in the capacity to lose without withdrawing, to win without inflating, and to recognise

in the person across from you a full human being whose struggle is as real and as worthy as your own.

That is why it is not enough for a gym to produce strong bodies and good technique. It must also ask what kind of men it is making.

Does the room produce men who are calmer under pressure, or simply more aggressive? Does it produce men who can hold power without becoming intoxicated by it? Does it produce men who can lose without collapse, win without vanity, and help others grow without feeling diminished by it? Does it produce men who know how to listen, how to restrain themselves, how to use force without worshipping force, how to meet fear without needing to convert it into domination?

Or does it simply produce better-trained versions of the same modern male: restless, comparative, hungry for status, privately afraid, publicly hard, and forever one round away from feeling legitimate?

That question should haunt every serious teacher.

Because teachers do not merely pass on techniques. They create atmosphere. They decide, often without fully realising it, what the room values. They decide whether students are being shaped into human beings or merely sorted into visible categories of worth. They decide whether intensity is used to reveal truth or to inflate the strong and crush the uncertain. They decide whether training partners are invited into a genuine process of shared development or into a more polished version of the old social hierarchy.

A teacher may talk about brotherhood all day long, but the room tells the truth.

Foucault would recognise this immediately. The power dynamics of a training environment operate precisely as he described: not primarily through explicit rules but through normalisation, through the invisible pressures that teach people what counts as valuable, acceptable, and real. If the atmosphere is driven by insecurity, comparison, and unspoken status games, the students will absorb that more deeply and more permanently than any speech about honour. If the atmosphere is driven by presence, honesty, challenge, and genuine mutual respect, the students will absorb that too. A room is always teaching, constantly and relentlessly. The question is never whether the room has a philosophy. The question is whether anyone has chosen that philosophy consciously, or whether it has simply been inherited from the wider culture and allowed to run unchallenged.

I have felt this difference in my own life more than once.

I have been in martial environments where the air was charged with proving. Everyone was watching where they stood. Everyone was trying, in some visible or invisible way, not to be the lesser man. Even moments of apparent humility carried a subtle competitiveness, a performance of modesty that was really just another move in the endless chess game of status. You could feel the whole thing running beneath the surface like a current. The rounds were hard, but the hardness did not feel clean. It felt contaminated by ego, fear, and private hunger. Men might become stronger in those rooms, but not freer. Not more honest. Not more whole.

I have also been in rooms where challenge was just as serious, sometimes more so, but the atmosphere was entirely different. People were trying to do the thing well, not merely trying to establish rank through it. They were helping one another become more real. You could fail in front of them without it becoming a social death. You could be pushed hard without being humiliated. You could be strong without having

to perform hardness every single second. The room still demanded something of you, but what it demanded was your honest presence, not your constant justification of your place through dominance.

That difference is everything. It changes what a man begins to believe about strength itself.

In a comparison-driven room, strength means the ability to dominate, endure, suppress weakness, and stay high in the order. In a room shaped by genuine brotherhood, strength starts to mean something richer and more demanding. It means being reliable under pressure. It means being able to hold your ground without becoming a tyrant. It means staying present rather than reactive. It means helping make the room safer, sharper, and more truthful for others, not just extracting value from it for yourself. It means learning that your power does not diminish when someone else grows. That last sentence alone is a revolution in the way most modern men have been taught to think about strength. If your power diminishes when someone beside you grows, then you were never powerful. You were merely positioned. And positioning, unlike genuine strength, must be constantly defended against everyone around you, which is why it produces not confidence but permanent anxiety.

That is a lesson the modern world barely knows how to teach.

Modern life thrives on scarcity of worth. It keeps people comparing because comparison is one of the most efficient ways to keep them insecure, busy, and easy to organise. If I am measuring myself against you, I am less likely to stand with you. If I need your inferiority in order to feel solid, then I can never really become your brother. I can become your rival, your ally of convenience, your teammate, your fan, your follower, or your superior. But I cannot stand beside you in freedom. The

comparison kills the coalition before it starts. The ranking prevents the recognition. The hierarchy, when it becomes the emotional centre of the room rather than a functional structure in service of growth, ensures that every man remains fundamentally alone even when he is surrounded by other men.

Seneca, writing to his friend Lucilius in the first century, argued that genuine friendship is one of the greatest goods a human life can contain, but that it requires a foundation of inner freedom. A person who is enslaved by their own fears, appetites, and need for external validation cannot be a true friend, because they will always be using the relationship to meet a need rather than entering it freely. Seneca insisted that the work of becoming a friend is inseparable from the work of becoming a self: you must first develop the inner sovereignty that allows you to enter a relationship without needing to dominate, extract, or perform. Only then can you offer the other person the one thing that genuine friendship requires: your honest, undistorted, genuinely free presence.

That insight applies to the dojo with devastating precision. The man who enters the training room still enslaved by his need for validation cannot be a genuine brother to anyone in that room, no matter how loyal, how intense, or how physically present he appears. He will always be using the room, using the training partners, using the coach, using the atmosphere, as instruments in the ongoing project of securing his own sense of worth. He is not there for the other person. He is there for himself, and the other person is a means to that end. That is not brotherhood. That is utility dressed in the language of bond.

This is why the inner dojo, the work described in the previous chapter, is not a private luxury. It is the precondition of genuine community. Without inner sovereignty, there can be no genuine standing-with. Without self-knowledge, there can be no honest

encounter. Without the willingness to face one's own fear, vanity, and hunger for validation, there can be no authentic relationship with anyone else. The brotherhood of renegades is not a gathering of finished men who have transcended all weakness. It is a gathering of men who are honest about their weakness and committed to the ongoing work of becoming freer, more truthful, and more whole, not in isolation, but in the demanding proximity of one another.

This is not an argument against standards, hierarchy, or excellence. It is important to say that clearly, because some people hear any critique of status culture as an attack on seriousness. It is not. A room needs standards. A path needs structure. Experience matters. Skill matters. Leadership matters. There is nothing wrong with recognising those who have gone further, earned more, or carry greater responsibility. The problem begins when hierarchy stops being in service of formation and starts becoming the emotional centre of the room, when rank stops being a functional reality and becomes an identity addiction. Then everyone begins orbiting rank rather than truth. Then the room exists to maintain the hierarchy rather than the hierarchy existing to serve the room.

Hierarchy should serve growth, not feed vanity. Skill should serve life, not reinforce insecurity. Leadership should carry burden, not manufacture myth. If those things are held rightly, a room can remain strong without becoming toxic. But if they are not, then even the best technical environment can become spiritually dead. It can turn men into functionaries of a pecking order while telling them they are part of something sacred.

That sort of false sacredness is one of the most corrosive things I have ever encountered in martial arts.

Because it gives men the feeling of belonging without the reality of transformation. It lets them feel tribal without becoming truthful. It lets them feel powerful without becoming wise. It gives them language for honour while leaving their inner life entirely untouched. A room can be full of ritual, rank, and seriousness and still fail to produce actual brothers. And most of the men in that room, because they have never experienced anything else, will not even know what they are missing. They will mistake the performance of brotherhood for the thing itself, and they will go home after training to the same loneliness they arrived with, believing that loneliness is simply the price of being a man.

It is not. It is the price of a culture that has forgotten what men actually need from each other.

Brotherhood, in the deeper sense, requires something more costly than shared intensity.

It requires honesty. It requires that men become willing to be seen beyond their performed strengths. It requires that challenge not be reduced to ego warfare. It requires that the room become a place where people can be called upward without being used as props in somebody else's drama of dominance. It requires that the stronger man not need the weaker man's humiliation in order to feel his own power. It requires that the weaker man not need to hide behind jokes, excuses, or posturing in order to remain human in the room. It requires that everyone, to whatever degree they are capable, begin to understand that the point is not simply to become harder, but to become more whole. And it requires that this understanding be not merely spoken but structurally embodied in the way the room operates, in the way sparring is conducted, in the way feedback is given, in the way new students are received, in the way loss is handled, in the way power is carried.

That sort of room becomes rare very quickly. Which is why it matters so much when it appears.

I think one of the greatest gifts martial arts can offer the modern world is precisely this sort of countercultural brotherhood. A place where men are not only trained to endure pressure but to meet one another more truthfully under that pressure. A place where challenge and care are not treated as opposites but as two faces of the same seriousness. A place where competition has its place but does not become the whole moral horizon of the room. A place where the standards remain high but the point of the standards is no longer the endless production of visible superiority. A place where one man's growth is genuinely celebrated rather than secretly experienced as a threat. A place where the stronger man sees his role not as dominator but as steward, where his strength exists in part to create conditions under which others can safely grow.

MacIntyre's concept of the practice, which we encountered earlier, is relevant here in its fullest sense. A practice, for MacIntyre, is not merely an activity. It is a social form in which internal goods are pursued in community, and in which the standards of excellence are maintained by the community itself through sustained engagement over time. A practice requires practitioners, people who submit themselves to the discipline, who accept the authority of the tradition while also contributing to its ongoing development. But crucially, a practice also requires a community that is organised around the internal goods rather than the external ones. When the community is captured by external goods, when status, money, and power become the organising principles, the practice degrades. It can only be sustained by a community that genuinely values what the practice actually produces: not trophies, not brands, not followers, but the transformation of the people who give themselves to it.

The brotherhood I am describing is that community. It is a community of practice in MacIntyre's fullest sense: a group of people bound together by a shared commitment to the internal goods of martial arts, which are not belts or competitive results or social media metrics but the formation of character, the cultivation of courage, the development of practical wisdom, and the ongoing, never-finished work of becoming more integrated, more honest, and more capable of living well. Such a community does not depend on everyone being at the same level. It depends on everyone being oriented in the same direction: toward the deeper purpose of the practice rather than toward the external rewards that the modern world dangles in front of it.

This does not happen by accident. It has to be built.

It has to be built through the way a teacher leads, through the way senior students carry themselves, through the way wins and losses are interpreted, through the way weakness is handled, through the way humour is used, through the way conflict is addressed, through whether the room rewards cruelty or maturity, through whether the hidden currency is vanity or truth. A hundred small daily choices make the difference between a brotherhood and a pecking order. And because we live in the age we do, those choices have to be made deliberately, consciously, against the grain of everything the culture is pushing toward.

The machine is too strong now for depth to survive by habit alone. Every force around us pushes toward content, brand, comparison, and spectacle. Men are already being trained everywhere else to see one another through those lenses: as competitors, as threats, as audiences, as obstacles, as content. If the dojo does not actively resist that shaping, it will passively absorb it. Then the room may still look strong from the outside, but inwardly it will simply become another minor branch office of the same civilisation that is making men sick.

That is not what I want from martial arts. It is not what I have ever wanted.

I want a place where men become harder to manipulate through shame. A place where strength is joined to humility, intensity to proportion, courage to tenderness, skill to seriousness of soul. A place where a man can be pushed to his edge without being stripped of dignity. A place where he can fail, recover, learn, and remain human throughout. A place where the old modern lie, that worth is always scarce and must be fought for against the man beside you, begins to lose its grip, replaced by something older and truer: that genuine strength is not diminished by the strength of others, that genuine worth does not require someone else's inferiority, and that the deepest form of power is the power to stand with another person without needing anything from them except their honesty.

That, to me, is brotherhood against the machine.

Not softness. Not withdrawal. Not a fantasy of perfect harmony. Brotherhood forged under real physical challenge, held to real standards of discipline and skill, but directed toward something other than status and performance. Brotherhood that says: we are not here merely to become more dangerous or more admired. We are here to become more awake. More disciplined. More useful in the deepest sense of that word. More capable of carrying life, not just conflict. More able to face ourselves and each other without all the usual armour of image and rank. More willing to be known, not as we perform ourselves, but as we are.

That sort of brotherhood is one of the few things that can make men dangerous in the right way.

Dangerous not because they are violent, but because they become difficult to organise through the usual mechanisms of the age. They no longer need to perform quite so

much. They no longer need the endless comparison. They no longer need to build identity through being above. They no longer need to live inside permanent competition with every man in the room. They can stand together in something more stable than status and more durable than tribe. They can become what the old traditions always intended the dojo to produce: a community of men who are free enough within themselves to be genuinely present to one another, and who use that presence not to dominate but to grow, together, into something that none of them could have become alone.

And once they can do that, another possibility opens.

Martial arts stops being merely a place people go to train. It becomes a way of life. Not in the shallow sense of lifestyle branding, but in the deeper sense that the values of the room begin to shape how people move through the world. Presence under pressure. Seriousness without spectacle. Strength without domination. Loyalty without tribal blindness. Challenge without cruelty. Brotherhood without performance. If those things become real on the training floor, they do not stay on the training floor. They travel. They enter relationships. They enter work. They enter fatherhood, friendship, community, and every hard conversation that demands the capacity to remain both strong and human at the same time.

That is where we need to go next.

Because if the room can become a place of genuine brotherhood, if the dojo can resist the machine and build something that actually forms human beings rather than merely sorting them, then the final question is no longer only what happens inside the training hall. The final question is what sort of life grows out of it. What does it actually mean to live as a martial artist in this century, not for the duration of a class or a competition season, but across the full arc of a human life?

# Chapter 8: Martial ARTs as a Way of Life

At some point the question changes.

It is no longer enough to ask what martial arts can teach you on the mat, or how it can help you in a fight, or whether it can build discipline, confidence, resilience, and all the other things people usually list when they want to speak well of training. Those things matter. They may matter a great deal. But if the path is alive in the deeper sense, another question eventually takes over. It is quieter, but far more demanding. It asks not what happens in the dojo, but what sort of life the dojo is shaping. Not what techniques you know, but who you are becoming. Not how you perform under pressure in a controlled environment, but how the pressure has begun to re-educate your way of being in the world.

That, to me, is the real test.

Pierre Hadot spent the last decades of his life arguing that the ancient philosophers never understood philosophy as something separate from the rest of life. There was no "doing philosophy" in one room and then "living" in another. The philosophical life was the life. The Stoic did not practise his exercises in the morning and then forget them at lunch. The Epicurean did not retreat to theoretical contemplation and then re-enter the world unchanged. The exercises were designed to penetrate everything: how one ate, how one spoke, how one carried oneself in public, how one met grief, how one faced desire, how one handled power, how one prepared for death. The whole point was that philosophy was not a subject but a way of being in the

world, and any version of it that remained confined to the school or the lecture hall had already failed on its own terms.

Martial arts faces exactly the same test. And by that test, most of what passes for modern martial arts has already failed.

Because the martial path is not finally about the room in which you train. It is about the life you carry out of that room. The bow, the gloves, the drills, the rounds, the line work, the sparring, the grappling, the fatigue, the soreness, the small humiliations, the sudden insights, the long plateaus, the occasional moments when things click and you feel, if only briefly, that body and mind are moving together as a single instrument of attention, all of that is only meaningful if it opens into life. If it stays trapped inside performance, it remains a specialised skill, impressive within its domain and irrelevant beyond it. If it changes the way you stand, speak, listen, love, endure, restrain yourself, and meet reality, then it has become something else entirely. Then it has become ART.

When I say martial ARTist, that is what I mean. And I capitalise the ART deliberately, not as a typographical flourish but as a philosophical claim.

I do not mean someone who adds philosophy to fighting in order to sound deeper at seminars. I do not mean someone who quotes old masters online while living no differently from anyone else. I do not mean a man who dresses his ego in Eastern language and calls it wisdom. I mean a person who has begun to let the path shape the whole of their life. Someone whose training is no longer a compartment but a discipline of being. Someone who understands that every genuine art eventually exceeds its medium. Painting exceeds paint. Music exceeds sound. Writing exceeds language. Martial art, if it is truly art, must exceed combat. The combat is the material. The life is the work.

Aristotle understood this. His entire ethics rests on the insight that the good life is not a collection of good moments but a unified whole, a life shaped by consistent character expressed across every domain of existence. He used the word *eudaimonia* not to describe a feeling of happiness but to describe a life that is going well in the deepest sense: a life in which a person's actions, relationships, pleasures, sufferings, and choices are all expressions of a settled, virtuous character. The person living *eudaimonia* does not switch between different selves depending on the context. They do not perform courage at the gym and cowardice at home. They do not practise restraint on the mat and abandon it in conversation. The virtues are not compartmentalised skills. They are dispositions of the whole person, and they show up everywhere or they show up nowhere.

This is where so much confusion enters the modern martial arts world. And it is where the deepest failure lives.

Modern culture is extraordinarily good at turning everything into categories. Work stays in one box. Fitness in another. Therapy in another. Spirituality in another. Relationships in another. Martial arts in another. We become specialists in fragmented selves. The fighter at the gym. The professional at the office. The partner at home. The curated self online. The tired self late at night. The private self no one really knows. The result is not depth but partition. A person may be highly developed in one domain and inwardly chaotic in the rest. They may be calm under a punch and ridiculous in an argument. They may be disciplined in training and utterly undisciplined in the way they consume attention, spend money, speak to people, or carry themselves through ordinary life. If the martial path leaves those partitions untouched, then however serious the training may be, it has not yet become a way of life. It has become another speciality within the fractured modern self.

Heidegger had a term for this fragmented existence. He called it *Verfallenheit*, fallenness: the condition of being scattered into the distractions, roles, and preoccupations of everyday life without any unifying centre. The fallen person is not wicked. They are simply dispersed. They go from task to task, role to role, self-presentation to self-presentation, without ever gathering themselves into a coherent whole. They are busy without being present. They are functional without being free. They have activities but not a life, in the deeper sense that a life is something that has been taken hold of, shaped, and lived with intention rather than merely allowed to happen.

A way of life is the opposite of fallenness. It is integration.

It means the values awakened in training begin to shape the quality of your presence everywhere else. It means that how you breathe under pressure becomes relevant outside the gym. It means that how you meet discomfort on the mat changes how you meet difficulty at home. It means that your relationship with fear, pain, uncertainty, ego, effort, and restraint begins to alter the whole texture of your days, not only the hours you spend in the dojo but the hours you spend in traffic, in conversation, in solitude, in the tedious negotiations of ordinary domestic life that are, if we are honest, far more demanding of character than any sparring round. It means the art no longer asks only: can you fight? It asks: can you live?

That question has become increasingly important to me because I have seen too many people train for years without ever letting the path fully penetrate the rest of their existence. They get better at the visible part. They become sharper, tougher, more conditioned, more technically sound. Yet their life off the mat remains just as reactive, distracted, ego-driven, brittle, and poorly examined as before. They are one person in the gym and another everywhere else. At some point one has to ask whether

that is a failure of the individual practitioner, the teacher, the culture, or the entire way martial arts has been conceptualised in the modern world.

I think the answer is some mixture of all four. But the deepest failure lies in the conceptualisation. If martial arts is presented merely as combat skill, fitness, or performance, then most people will naturally stop there. They will take from it whatever the framing suggests it is for. If the room says this is about winning, then they will train to win. If it says this is about confidence, they will train for confidence. If it says this is about self-defence, they will train for self-defence. The deeper dimensions do not appear by magic. They do not emerge automatically from hard physical training, any more than wisdom emerges automatically from reading a lot of books. They have to be cultivated, named, and embodied within a culture that takes them seriously. The art does not become a way of life by accident. It becomes a way of life when the practitioner and the community around them begin treating it as a discipline of becoming rather than a service one consumes.

This is why I keep coming back to the phrase that has organised my teaching for years: Mat, Street, Life.

The mat is not isolated from the street, and neither of them is isolated from life. The old mistake in many martial cultures was to imagine that the art existed only in one of those worlds. Either the protected world of the dojo, where everything becomes internal and aesthetic and disconnected from real consequence, or the brutal world of the street, where everything becomes threat, survival, and force. But the real field has always been larger than both. The point is not merely what happens in controlled training, nor merely what happens in worst-case violence. The point is how training shapes the whole person who must move between all these worlds, who must be capable on the mat, prepared for the street, and fully alive in the vast, complicated,

unglamorous territory that constitutes the other ninety-nine percent of human existence.

If the mat teaches me presence, then that presence must travel.

If it teaches me composure, then that composure must appear when the pressure is emotional rather than physical, when my child is in distress, when my partner is angry, when the world is offering me every reason to lose my centre and none to keep it.

If it teaches me restraint, then restraint must matter when I am furious with someone I love, not only when I am trying not to hit too hard in a round.

If it teaches me courage, then courage must include difficult conversations, truth-telling, and the refusal to keep living by scripts that no longer belong to me, even when those scripts are comfortable and even when abandoning them costs me the approval of people I care about.

If it teaches me awareness, then awareness must help me notice not only an external threat but the inward movement of pride, fear, resentment, vanity, or self-deception as it arises, before it hardens into action and does its damage.

Otherwise the path remains partial. And a partial path, however impressive in its specialised domain, is not yet a way of life.

The Stoics had a phrase for this integration: *sympatheia ton holon*, the interconnectedness of all things. They believed that the universe was a unified whole in which every part was related to every other part, and that the wise person was someone who understood their own life as a single, coherent expression of their character rather than as a collection of disconnected episodes. The Stoic sage did not

behave one way in the forum and another way at home. He did not practise virtue when it was convenient and abandon it when it was not. His character was his life, expressed consistently across every domain, and the consistency itself was the measure of his wisdom. Not perfection. Consistency. The ongoing effort to bring every dimension of existence under the governance of the same honest, examined, deliberately chosen values.

This is where the modern martial artist has to make a choice. He can remain a specialist in controlled struggle, or he can let the path become a discipline of living. The first route is easier in some ways. It is measurable. It produces visible results. It satisfies the culture of performance. The second route is harder because it offers fewer external rewards and demands far more honesty. It requires that you stop treating martial practice as an event that begins when you enter the gym and ends when you leave, and start letting it question your whole life. It requires that you allow the path to follow you home.

That is not always pleasant.

A martial art lived as a way of life will start exposing things you would perhaps prefer not to see. It will expose whether your strength is joined to kindness or whether it has become a shield against vulnerability. It will expose whether your discipline ends at the gym door. It will expose whether your love of pressure is clean or whether you need intensity because you do not know how to be with stillness. It will expose whether your identity as a martial artist is serving truth or merely giving you a more flattering costume in which to avoid the demands of ordinary humanity.

Kierkegaard wrote that the most difficult thing in the world is to become what one already is. Not to become something extraordinary. Not to achieve something spectacular. But to arrive at the simple, complete, honest inhabitation of one's own

existence, without disguise, without performance, without the endless evasion that constitutes most of what passes for a life. The martial ARTs path, when it is lived as a way of life rather than practised as a hobby, makes precisely this demand. It says: stop being a collection of roles and become a person. Stop performing strength and become strong. Stop accumulating techniques and become skilful in the way you meet your own life. Stop talking about the warrior path and start walking it, not on the mat where everyone can see you, but in the kitchen at six in the morning, in the conversation you have been avoiding, in the silence that follows failure, in the long unglamorous stretches where nobody is watching and the only audience is your own conscience.

I say this because I have had to face it in myself.

There were years when I knew how to train far better than I knew how to rest. Years when effort came more naturally than stillness. Years when the body could be pushed hard but not listened to well. Years when the martial self was more integrated than the man living the rest of his life. That sort of imbalance can persist for a long time because the subculture keeps rewarding it. People admire the hard man, the dedicated man, the always-training man, the one who can keep going, the one whose life looks disciplined from the outside. But a life can look disciplined and still be disordered in deeper ways. The martial artist who trains every day but cannot sit in a room with his own thoughts for twenty minutes has not yet integrated the path. The fighter who is calm under a jab but explosive in a disagreement has not yet let the mat teach him what it was trying to teach. The coach who demands excellence from his students but cannot extend patience to his own children has not yet become what the path was designed to produce.

The question does not end. It matures.

As a younger man, it may begin around violence and fear. Am I still afraid? Can I stand my ground? Can I fight? Can I survive? Those are serious questions. They matter. But if the path deepens, the later questions become more subtle and, in some ways, more difficult. Can I carry power without becoming intoxicated by it? Can I remain soft where softness is needed? Can I accept ageing without humiliation? Can I teach without turning students into extensions of my own ego? Can I stop proving? Can I walk away when walking away is wiser than standing my ground? *Can I live with enoughness in a culture built entirely on the premise that enough does not exist?*

That last question may be among the most martial of all.

The ancient Cynics, Diogenes chief among them, understood that one of the most radical acts of freedom available to a human being is the refusal to want more. Not the refusal to have. The refusal to want. The culture we live in is designed, from the ground up, to produce wanting. It manufactures desire the way a factory manufactures goods. It needs you to want the next thing, the next achievement, the next belt, the next recognition, the next upgrade to your identity. Without that perpetual wanting, the entire machine grinds to a halt. The person who can stand inside that machine and say, "I have enough. I am enough. The path is enough," is performing an act of rebellion so quiet that almost no one recognises it as rebellion. But it is. It may be the deepest rebellion there is, because it strikes at the root of the system's power: the manufactured insufficiency that keeps everyone grasping.

To live as a martial artist now is to stand against the whole modern cult of excess, spectacle, and endless self-display. It is to choose depth over noise. Practice over branding. Presence over performance. It is to understand that the path was never meant to make you more marketable. It was meant to make you more real. That may mean a quieter life from the outside. It may mean fewer trophies, fewer followers,

fewer dramatic announcements of who you are becoming. It may also mean a far richer life inside, a life in which the practitioner discovers, perhaps for the first time, that the quality of his attention matters more than the quantity of his accomplishments.

As I previously noted, Simone Weil wrote that the capacity for attention is the rarest and most precious thing a human being can develop, and that nearly everything we call education fails to develop it. She believed that genuine attention, the ability to be fully present to what is actually before you without distortion, without the interference of ego, without the constant commentary of desire and fear, was not merely an intellectual skill. It was the foundation of all genuine moral and spiritual life. A person who can attend fully to another human being can love. A person who can attend fully to their own experience can know themselves. A person who can attend fully to reality, as it actually is rather than as they wish it to be, can act with wisdom. And a person who cannot attend, who is perpetually distracted, perpetually performing, perpetually scattered among the fragments of a life never gathered into wholeness, can do none of these things, no matter how talented, how intelligent, or how technically accomplished they may be.

The martial art lived as a way of life is, at its deepest, a discipline of attention.

Not only the sharp, tactical attention of the sparring round, though that is part of it. The broader, quieter, more sustained attention that allows a person to be genuinely present to their own life as it unfolds. The attention that notices the first stirring of anger before it becomes an outburst. The attention that recognises fear without being consumed by it. The attention that perceives the other person in a conversation as a full human being rather than as an obstacle, a threat, or a means to an end. The attention that can hold stillness without needing to fill it with noise, activity, or

performance. This is what all the training, all the rounds, all the years of disciplined practice are ultimately for: not the production of a more efficient fighter, but the cultivation of a more attentive, more present, more integrated human being.

A martial ARTist, as I understand it, should be recognisable not only by what he can do in combat but by how he moves through ordinary existence.

He should know how to carry himself in a room without trying to dominate it. He should know how to absorb pressure without immediately escalating. He should know how to stay with discomfort rather than fleeing into impulse. He should know how to stand his ground and how to yield without humiliation. He should know how to use strength in service of protection rather than theatre. He should know how to endure solitude without becoming bitter. He should know how to train seriously without turning seriousness into identity addiction. He should know how to recognise fear and not immediately kneel to it. He should know how to recognise anger and not mistake it for clarity. He should know how to continue refining himself without becoming trapped in the endless treadmill of self-improvement, which is just another form of the modern disease, the conviction that you are always insufficient, always in need of optimisation, never permitted to simply be what you are.

*That is a way of life.* And because it is a way of life, it reaches into territories that modern martial discourse almost never touches.

It reaches into how one speaks to a partner. Whether you bring the same quality of presence and restraint to an intimate conversation that you bring to a sparring round, or whether you reserve your best self for the gym and give your worst to the people who matter most. It reaches into whether you can be present with children, whether you can slow down enough to meet them in their world rather than constantly dragging them into yours. It reaches into whether you need every conflict to have a

winner, or whether you have developed the capacity to sit with ambiguity, to hold two perspectives at once, to let a disagreement exist without needing to resolve it through dominance. It reaches into whether you can apologise, which requires more genuine courage than most things that happen on any mat. It reaches into whether you use silence well, whether stillness is an ally or an enemy, whether you can sit with yourself without reaching for distraction. It reaches into how you handle disappointment, illness, ageing, fatigue, and the deep ordinary sadness that comes with being mortal, with loving things that will end, with inhabiting a body that will not last forever.

A person can be a brilliant technician and poor in all these things. That is why technique can never be the final measure of the path.

I think this is one of the reasons the old language of warriorhood became so degraded. It was detached from life. It became costume, posture, rhetoric, and performance. The word "warrior" was emptied of its original content and refilled with the values of the age: toughness, dominance, invulnerability, spectacle. But if the word is to mean anything now, it must be reclaimed in ordinary existence. Not on the stage. Not on the screen. Not in the highlight reel. In the kitchen. In the morning silence before anyone else is awake. In the difficult conversation you have been postponing. In the moment when the old reactive pattern rises and you choose, for once, not to follow it. A warrior is not merely a person who can do violence. A warrior is someone whose training has disciplined their relationship to fear, ego, desire, suffering, and responsibility. Someone who can remain upright in difficulty without becoming cruel. Someone who can protect without worshipping conflict. Someone who has not outsourced their soul to the values of the age.

That is why the martial artist is necessarily philosophical.

Not because he must become academic, not because he needs to sit around discussing Heidegger after class, though he is welcome to. But because he cannot escape the central question that philosophy exists to address: what is a good life, and what kind of person should I become? The modern world answers that question badly. It says success, visibility, optimisation, and performance are enough. The martial artist must answer otherwise. He must say: no. The point is not simply to become formidable. The point is to become free enough, grounded enough, and awake enough that force no longer has the last word in your understanding of strength.

Aristotle's concept of phronesis, practical wisdom, returns here in its fullest application. Phronesis is not knowledge of general principles. It is the ability to perceive what each particular situation requires and to respond with the right action, in the right way, at the right time, for the right reasons. It is the virtue that governs all the other virtues, because without it, courage becomes recklessness, restraint becomes passivity, generosity becomes profligacy, and strength becomes brutality. Phronesis cannot be taught in the way that techniques can be taught. It can only be cultivated through sustained practice, through accumulated experience, through honest reflection on one's own failures, and through the ongoing willingness to keep learning from the gap between what you intended and what you actually did. It is, in this sense, the highest expression of the martial path lived as a way of life: the capacity to bring all of your training, all of your discipline, all of your experience to bear on the endlessly varied, endlessly surprising, endlessly demanding business of being alive.

This is also why the martial artist must remain an ARTist.

Art involves care, refinement, perception, and the ability to shape a medium into something meaningful. In martial practice, the first medium is the self. The body is shaped, yes. But so is attention. So is timing. So is temperament. So is presence. So is

one's relationship to power. So is one's relationship to uncertainty, failure, and the slow accumulation of age. To train artistically is not to become decorative. It is to become sensitive to form, proportion, rhythm, and truth in every dimension of the practice, including the dimensions that never appear on camera. It is to stop treating martial practice as crude utility and begin seeing it as a craft of becoming, in which the raw material is your own life and the finished work is the person you are still, always, in the process of becoming.

A craft takes time. It also takes humility.

Heidegger, late in his career, wrote beautifully about the nature of craftsmanship, arguing that the true craftsman does not impose his will on the material. He listens to it. He attends to what the wood wants to become, what the stone allows, what the metal reveals under the hammer. The craftsman is not a tyrant over his medium. He is in dialogue with it. He brings skill, yes, and intention, yes, but he also brings receptivity, the willingness to be taught by the material itself, to let the work show him things he did not expect.

The martial artist who approaches the path as a craft of becoming must develop this same receptivity. He is not simply expressing himself through the art. He is being shaped by it. The art is working on him as much as he is working on the art. Every round teaches something, not only about technique but about character, if he has the humility to receive the lesson. Every failure reveals something about his relationship to ego, if he does not immediately cover it over with excuses. Every long plateau tests his patience, his fidelity, and his capacity to continue without the reward of visible progress. The path is not a vehicle for self-expression alone. It is a long education of body, mind, and character, and like all genuine educations, it requires the willingness

to be changed by what you encounter rather than merely using what you encounter to reinforce what you already believe.

This is where slowness becomes important.

The modern world wants quick gains, visible progress, accelerated identity. It wants to convert every practice into a measurable improvement arc with clear milestones and regular dopamine hits. But art, real art, often develops under fundamentally different temporal conditions. It requires patience, repetition, frustration, dead seasons, and long fidelity without applause. The Japanese have a word, *shuhari*, that describes the three stages of mastery in traditional arts: *shu*, in which the student follows the form exactly as taught; *ha*, in which the student begins to break from the form and explore variations; and *ri*, in which the form has been so deeply internalised that the practitioner transcends it entirely and moves with a freedom that contains the form without being constrained by it. What matters about *shuhari* is not the stages themselves but the temporal scale they imply. The passage from *shu* to *ri* cannot be hurried. It takes years. Sometimes decades. It requires the kind of sustained, patient engagement that the modern world, with its demand for constant novelty and its horror of slow development, finds almost intolerable.

A martial artist must be willing to be formed at that pace. He must resist the modern pressure to turn every month into proof, every season into progress, every year into a visible advancement of the personal brand. He must understand that some of the deepest changes happen quietly, through repeated honest practice, until one day he notices that the man who enters conflict now is not the man who used to enter it. That the old reactivity has softened. That the body no longer panics in the same way. That ego no longer has such a tight grip. That stillness is less threatening than it once was. That he can sit in a room without needing to be the most important person in it.

That strength has become less about what he can impose and more about what he can hold.

That sort of change cannot be hurried without being falsified. And because it cannot be hurried, it cannot be spectacular most of the time.

This is another reason the martial artist must stand against the age. He must refuse the demand to make everything visible, measurable, and immediately legible as achievement. He must accept that much of the path happens in obscurity. In ordinary sessions. In repetitive work. In teaching the basics for the hundredth time without resentment. In noticing the small tensions in the body that reveal the larger tensions in the soul. In choosing not to escalate when everything in you wants to escalate. In walking away when walking away serves life more than standing your ground. In beginning again after injury, disappointment, or doubt. In continuing without the guarantee that anyone outside the room will ever understand what is being shaped.

That is where the path becomes real.

Not in the dramatic moments alone, but in the sedimentation of practice into a life. Drop by drop. Year by year. Session by session. Until the practice is no longer something you do and has become something you are.

I think this is why older practitioners often carry something that younger fighters do not yet understand. Not always, of course. Age can harden people as easily as soften them, and I have met men who trained for forty years and emerged no wiser than they entered. But when the path has been lived honestly, when the inner dojo has been taken seriously, when the art has been allowed to work on the practitioner rather than being used merely by the practitioner, time gives the art another register entirely. The emphasis shifts. You stop being so fascinated by what you can impose and become

more interested in what you can hold. You stop needing every test and become more discerning about which tests matter. You stop confusing intensity with depth. You become more reverent toward the body because you know, in your bones now, that it is finite. You become less interested in proving and more interested in carrying the art into the rest of life without distortion, without performance, without the need for anyone to see what you have become.

Montaigne, writing in his tower in the sixteenth century, described the project of his *Essays* as the attempt to know himself honestly, to study the one subject that was always available and always elusive: his own nature. He did not write to teach others. He wrote to discover what he thought, what he felt, what he was. The *Essays* are the record of a man paying attention to his own life with a quality of honesty that is still, five centuries later, almost without parallel. Montaigne understood that self-knowledge is not a destination. It is a practice. It is never complete. It requires the willingness to keep looking, to keep revising, to keep admitting that the person you thought you were yesterday is not quite the person you discover today. The martial artist who has let the path become a way of life practises this same ongoing self-study, not through writing, necessarily, but through the daily discipline of training and living and noticing the gap between who he performs himself to be and who he actually is.

This does not make the older practitioner less martial. It makes him more so.

Because the real test was never whether you could live forever in the furnace. The real test was whether the furnace could forge something worth carrying into peace. Whether the decades of hard training, hard rounds, hard truths, and hard-won skill could produce not just a formidable body but a person capable of meeting the full range of human experience, the joy and the grief, the strength and the fragility, the

violence and the tenderness, the certainty and the doubt, with something approaching wholeness.

That is where the path either flowers or collapses into repetition.

If all your years of training have only made you good in the dojo, then something has gone wrong. If the mat has taught you how to handle an opponent but not how to handle your own grief, something has been missed. If you can remain calm under a choke but cannot remain calm under disappointment, the training has not gone deep enough. But if the dojo has taught you how to be in the world with more dignity, more courage, more restraint, more truth, more capacity to remain present without posturing, more willingness to be human in a world that keeps trying to turn you into a performance, then the art has become a way of life.

That is what I want for martial arts now. This is what I want for my own continued journey on the path.

Not more spectacle. Not more branding. Not more polished hardness. Not more men performing warriorhood while inwardly shaped by the same anxieties as everyone else. I want a path that helps people become difficult to manipulate through fear and status. A path that gives them real skill without making skill the whole story. A path that treats violence seriously without worshipping it. A path that forms men and women who can stand apart from the age's definitions of worth not because they are trying to look original but because their training has shaped them into people who serve another measure of what a human life is for.

That is the martial ARTist.

Not the best-trained conformist. Not the loudest self-proclaimed warrior. Not the most decorated personality on the mat. But the person who has allowed the path to

shape the whole of their life, slowly, honestly, and without shortcuts. The person whose training reaches beyond the visible exchange and into the way they inhabit their body, their work, their relationships, their fear, their responsibility, and their mortality. The person who understands that the martial life is not finally about becoming more dangerous than others but about becoming less owned by the forces that make modern life so spiritually thin.

That is the vision this book has been moving toward.

And from here, only one thing remains. To gather the threads. To say plainly what this path is asking of us now. To make the final case that the martial ARTist, if he is truly an artist, must become once again a renegade, a philosopher in motion, a rebel against reduction, and a guardian of a way of being that the age has almost forgotten how to value, let alone produce.

# Chapter 9: The Unfinished Art

I want to return, one last time, to the boy.

He is six years old. He is sitting on the floor of a dojo in Johannesburg, in a white belt that is too big for him, in a room that smells like sweat and floor polish and other people's fear. He does not know what philosophy is. He does not know what arete means, or eudaimonia, or prosoche, or any of the words that have shaped this book. He does not know that one day he will stand in front of rooms full of special forces operators and speak about the inner life of the warrior. He does not know that he will spend decades sorting what works from what is fantasy, that he will fight in rings and on streets and in the cages of his own mind, that he will build something and watch it hollow out and then try to rebuild it on deeper foundations. He knows almost nothing. What he knows is that the world is dangerous, that home is not safe, that the boys on the street are stronger than he is, and that something in those old kung fu films stirs a feeling he cannot name but cannot ignore.

He is drawn to the figure on the screen. Not because the figure is violent, though violence is part of the story. Because the figure is free. Because the figure refuses. Because the figure has been beaten down by the world and has chosen, through a discipline the boy does not yet understand, to become something the world did not authorise. The boy does not have the word for it yet. He will spend the next forty-seven years looking for it. He will try "fighter." He will try "champion." He will try "coach." He will try "teacher." He will try "warrior." None of them will be quite right, because none of them captures the whole of what that figure on the screen was pointing toward. The figure was not just fighting. He was becoming. And the becoming was the point.

I am that boy. I am also the man who has carried that boy's original hunger through nearly five decades of training, teaching, failing, rebuilding, and questioning. And what I want to say in this final chapter, as plainly as I know how, is that the hunger was right. The intuition was sound. The path that the boy sensed in those flickering images was real. It has always been real. It is older than any style, any system, any organisation, any brand. It is the path of the human being who uses the discipline of martial practice to become more than the world is trying to make them.

That path is in danger now. Not of extinction, exactly. Martial arts will survive. The gyms will stay open. The competitions will continue. The content will keep being produced. The belts will keep being awarded. The industry will keep turning. But the art, the deeper thing, the practice of transformation that once lived at the centre of all this activity, is being quietly suffocated by the very culture that claims to celebrate it. It is being replaced by spectacle, by commerce, by the relentless conversion of everything into performance and product. The body of martial arts is healthy. The soul is struggling to breathe.

This book has been my attempt to name what is happening and to argue for a different way.

I have argued that survival, though it may be where many of us begin, is not the same as freedom. That the capacity to fight, however necessary, is not the same as the capacity to live. That the first step on the path is honest and urgent and must not be dismissed, but that the path only opens into its full depth when a person begins asking not merely how to endure the world but what kind of human being the world's pressure is shaping them into.

I have argued that the hollow victory, the strange emptiness that follows achievement when achievement has been loaded with existential weight it was never designed to

carry, is not a personal failure but a cultural one. That the formula itself is broken. That modern martial arts specifically (but not exclusively) as currently configured in too many places, promises transformation and delivers performance, promises depth and delivers decoration, promises meaning and delivers metrics. And that the practitioners who feel the hollowness are not weak. They are the ones honest enough to notice that the emperor has been sparring without clothes.

I have argued that the dojo, the mat, the academy, the gym has, in too many places, become another stage for the same forces it should be helping people resist. That the values of the achievement society, the burnout society, the society of the spectacle, have colonised the training floor so thoroughly that most practitioners cannot distinguish between the culture's values and their own. That the symbols of tradition survive while the substance has been replaced by the logic of the market.

I have argued that the art is dying, not because martial arts is unpopular but because it has been reduced to utility, to technique without transformation, to the martial without the art. That Gestell, the enframing disposition that reduces everything to resource and function, has turned practices once aimed at the formation of complete human beings into technologies of optimisation. That what was once *techne* in the richest sense has become mere procedure.

I have argued that what is needed is the renegade: the practitioner who sees through the performance and refuses to participate in it. Not a rebel for the sake of rebellion, but a person whose training has awakened in them a fidelity to something deeper than the culture's definition of success. Someone who practises *parrhesia* with their body and their life. Someone who is *atopos*, uncategorisable, unabsorbable, difficult for the machine to use.

I have argued that the real work takes place in the inner dojo, in the dimension of practice where fear, ego, shame, aggression, and vulnerability are brought into view and met with honest attention rather than suppressed, performed, or converted into fuel for dominance. That the body is not merely a vehicle for technique but the primary site of self-knowledge. That breath is not a wellness accessory but a discipline of inner sovereignty. That *prosoche*, the Stoic practice of self-attention, is alive and available on every training floor, if the culture of the room is willing to honour it.

I have argued that the renegade cannot remain alone. That genuine brotherhood, built on virtue rather than utility, on the I-Thou encounter rather than the I-It reduction, is not a luxury but a necessity. That the machine keeps men comparing because comparison prevents solidarity, and that the dojo must become one of the last places on earth where men can stand together in something more honest than tribal allegiance and more durable than shared aggression.

And I have argued that all of this must eventually leave the dojo and enter the rest of life. That the martial art, if it is genuine, cannot remain confined to the training floor any more than philosophy, in Hadot's vision, could remain confined to the lecture hall. That the real test of the path is not what you do in the round but who you are in the room, the kitchen, the conversation, the silence, the grief, the ordinary Tuesday morning when nobody is watching and the only pressure is the pressure of being alive.

That is the vision. Now let me say what it asks of you.

It asks you to begin questioning, if you have not already, the philosophy you have been training under. Not the techniques. The philosophy. The assumptions about what martial arts is for that you absorbed from your first gym, your first coach, your first

exposure to the culture, and that you have perhaps never examined since. What did that culture tell you strength was? What did it tell you success meant? What did it reward? What did it ignore? What version of you did it produce? And is that version the one you actually want to carry through the rest of your life?

Socrates said that the unexamined life is not worth living. He did not say it to be clever. He said it because he understood that a life driven by unexamined assumptions is not truly your own. It belongs to whoever installed the assumptions. If you have never questioned the philosophy running beneath your training, then your martial life, however hard-won, however physically impressive, may not be yours in the deepest sense. It may belong to the culture that shaped you, to the coach who framed your understanding, to the industry that sold you a definition of success, to the age itself and all its machinery of comparison, performance, and perpetual insufficiency.

The examined martial life begins when you take that philosophy back.

It asks you to consider what kind of practitioner you want to become, not in terms of belt rank or competitive record or technical catalogue, but in terms of character. Aristotle's question is always the right one: what does the person of arete look like? What does excellence actually mean when it is no longer defined by the culture's metrics? If you could design the martial artist you most want to become, not the one the market rewards, not the one social media celebrates, not the one the gym culture validates, but the one you would most respect if you met him at seventy, what would he look like? How would he carry himself? How would he handle power? How would he treat people who had nothing to offer him? How would he meet fear? How would he hold silence? How would he age? That image, honestly constructed, is worth more as a guide to training than any competition bracket or belt syllabus.

It asks you to take the inner dojo seriously. Not as a metaphor. Not as a nice idea you revisit occasionally between hard rounds. As a daily practice. As the dimension of training where the real transformation either happens or does not. It asks you to begin paying attention to what rises in you under pressure, not only to how you perform under pressure. It asks you to notice the patterns that your training reinforces, the aggression that may be serving ego rather than growth, the need to dominate that may be fear wearing a mask of strength, the avoidance of vulnerability that may be costing you the very depth you say you are seeking. The inner dojo is not comfortable. It is not supposed to be. It is supposed to be true.

It asks you to seek and build genuine brotherhood. Not tribe. Not team. Not brand loyalty. Brotherhood in Aristotle's sense: virtue friendship, grounded in mutual commitment to becoming better human beings, sustained by honesty rather than hierarchy, and measured not by what you can do for each other's status but by what you are willing to risk for each other's growth. That kind of brotherhood requires vulnerability, which is the one thing that modern martial arts culture is least equipped to offer and most desperately in need of. It requires you to be seen, not as you perform yourself, but as you are. It requires you to see others the same way. That is harder than any physical test the mat can provide, and it is worth more.

And it asks you, finally, to let the path exceed the dojo. To carry what the training teaches into the whole of your life. To let presence, composure, restraint, courage, and honest self-knowledge reshape the way you meet everything, not only the things that look like fights. To stop treating martial arts as a compartment and start treating it as a discipline of being alive. To measure the value of your training not by your highlight reel but by the quality of the life that grows around it. By how you carry yourself through difficulty. By how you treat people who cannot hurt you. By how

you meet the parts of existence that no technique can solve: loss, ageing, doubt, love, responsibility, and the long humbling process of discovering that you are not finished and never will be.

That is the martial ARTist I am calling for.

Not the champion of a system. The person who has let the path make them more complete than any system alone could produce. Not the brand ambassador of a gym. The person whose training has made them harder to buy, harder to manipulate, harder to flatten into the shape the age demands. Not the performer of warriorhood. The person who has done the quiet, difficult, unglamorous work of allowing the martial path to penetrate the deepest layers of their character and who carries the results of that work not as a display but as a way of being.

Nietzsche wrote that the three metamorphoses of the spirit move from the camel to the lion to the child. The camel bears the weight of tradition and duty, loading itself with the heaviest burdens it can carry because it believes that endurance is virtue. The lion rebels, saying no to the false obligations, destroying the old structures, claiming the freedom to create. And then, if the spirit has gone far enough, it becomes the child: not innocent in the sense of ignorant, but innocent in the sense of capable of beginning again. Capable of seeing the world with fresh eyes. Capable of creating something genuinely new, not from reaction against the old, but from a place so free that it no longer needs to define itself against anything at all.

I recognise all three metamorphoses in my own martial journey, and I suspect you may recognise them in yours.

*The camel:* the years of loading up. The technique, the rounds, the pain, the discipline, the obedience to coaches and systems and hierarchies. The willingness to

carry whatever the path demanded without asking why. There is something noble in the camel. Without that stage, nothing else can happen. The body must be trained. The fundamentals must be absorbed. The discipline must be built. The camel is necessary.

*The lion:* the years of questioning. The refusal. The growing inability to accept the dominant culture's answers. The moment when the hollow victory cracked open and the deeper questions began pressing through. Why am I training? What has this made of me? Is this enough? Is this even mine? The lion tears down. He says no. He breaks from what was given and insists on something truer. There is something dangerous and essential in the lion. Without that stage, the camel simply becomes a beast of burden for someone else's vision, endlessly carrying loads that were never his to carry.

But the lion is not the end. The lion alone produces only rebellion, and rebellion alone is just another form of reaction, still defined by the thing it opposes. *The child* is what comes after, if one is brave enough. The child does not carry. The child does not refuse. The child creates. The child begins again, from a place so free of the old burdens and the old battles that something genuinely original becomes possible.

I do not claim to have fully arrived at that third metamorphosis. I am not sure anyone does. But I know the direction, and I know what it feels like when the path moves toward it. It feels like the weight of proving begins to lift. It feels like the martial art stops being something you use and starts being something you inhabit. It feels like the body and the mind and the questions and the practice and the silence and the effort all begin to move as one thing. Not perfectly. Not permanently. But in moments, in stretches, in the slow accumulation of sessions and years and honest

encounters with the mat and with yourself, the old fragmentation softens and something closer to wholeness appears.

That is what the art is for.

Not winning. Not proving. Not surviving. Not performing. Not branding. Not climbing. Not accumulating credentials in a display case while the inner life remains untouched.

Becoming.

The art is for becoming. It has always been for becoming. Every tradition that has endured long enough to carry real wisdom has understood this, even when its institutions forgot, even when its practitioners reduced it to something smaller, even when the culture around it tried to convert it into entertainment, commerce, or spectacle. The impulse at the centre is always the same: the human being who picks up a practice, submits to its discipline, and allows it to change them into something they could not have become without it.

I am fifty-three years old this year. I have been on this path since I was six. I have fought in rings, on streets, on the doors of nightclubs where violence was not a sport but a nightly reality. I have trained with men who would later become household names in combat sports and with men who would never be known by anyone outside their own neighbourhood. I have built programmes, built reputations, built a name that once meant something in certain circles, and I have watched all of that become less important to me than the question of what sort of human being the path was actually making me. I have been the camel. I have been the lion. I am still, on my best days, trying to learn what it would mean to become *the child*.

I do not offer this book as the final word on martial arts. There is no final word. The path does not end. The art is not finished. It cannot be finished, because the material it works on, the human being, is not a thing that can be completed but a process that continues as long as breath does.

What I offer is an invitation.

Not to follow my system. Not to join my school. Not to adopt my vocabulary or my philosophical references. An invitation to take your own martial path seriously enough to ask the hardest questions of it. To refuse the diminished version. To insist that the art means something more than what the industry has made of it. To seek, in your own training and in your own life, the deeper thing that the boy in Johannesburg sensed in those old films before he had a single word for any of it.

The figure on the screen was not just a fighter. He was a human being who had been forged by discipline into someone the world could not own. Someone whose strength was not for sale. Someone whose freedom was not a slogan but an embodied reality, won through years of honest practice and carried quietly through a life that demanded everything he had.

That figure is still there. He is still waiting on the path. He does not care about your belt, your record, your following, or your brand. He cares about one thing only: are you willing to let this practice change you? Not your technique. You. Your character. Your relationship to fear, to power, to ego, to the people around you, and to the question of what a human life is actually for.

If you are, then the path is open. It has always been open. It will remain open long after every gym has closed and every competition has been forgotten and every highlight reel has disappeared into the void. Because the path is not the institution.

The path is not the industry. The path is not the culture. The path is what happens when a human being picks up a discipline and refuses to put it down until it has made them more free, more honest, more whole, and more capable of meeting the world without needing the world's permission to be who they are.

That is the martial art.

That is the unfinished art. And it is yours, if you want it.

# About the Author



Rodney King now lives a simpler life on the Isle of Man, a small island in the Irish Sea where the pace is slower and the noise of the modern world is easier to hold at a distance. He walks the coastal paths and woodlands most days, often alone, often in silence. He still practises his martial arts wherever he goes, not for an audience, not for content, not for any of the reasons the culture says you should, but because after forty-seven years the practice has become inseparable from the way he inhabits his body, his breath, and his days.

He has deliberately reduced his footprint in the modern martial arts world, for

many of the reasons this book describes. He works now with a small team of martial arts teachers who are walking the same path he is, people more interested in what the art makes of them than in what it can do for their brand. It is quieter work than what came before. It is also, he believes, more honest.

If you want to find out more about his approach to martial arts training, you can do so here: [\[LINK\]](#). If the ideas in this book spoke to you, he would love it if you pass it on to someone who needs it. You can always reach out to Rodney [HERE](#).