

# SELF-TRANSFORMATION & THE MARTIAL ARTS IN THE AMERICAN CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

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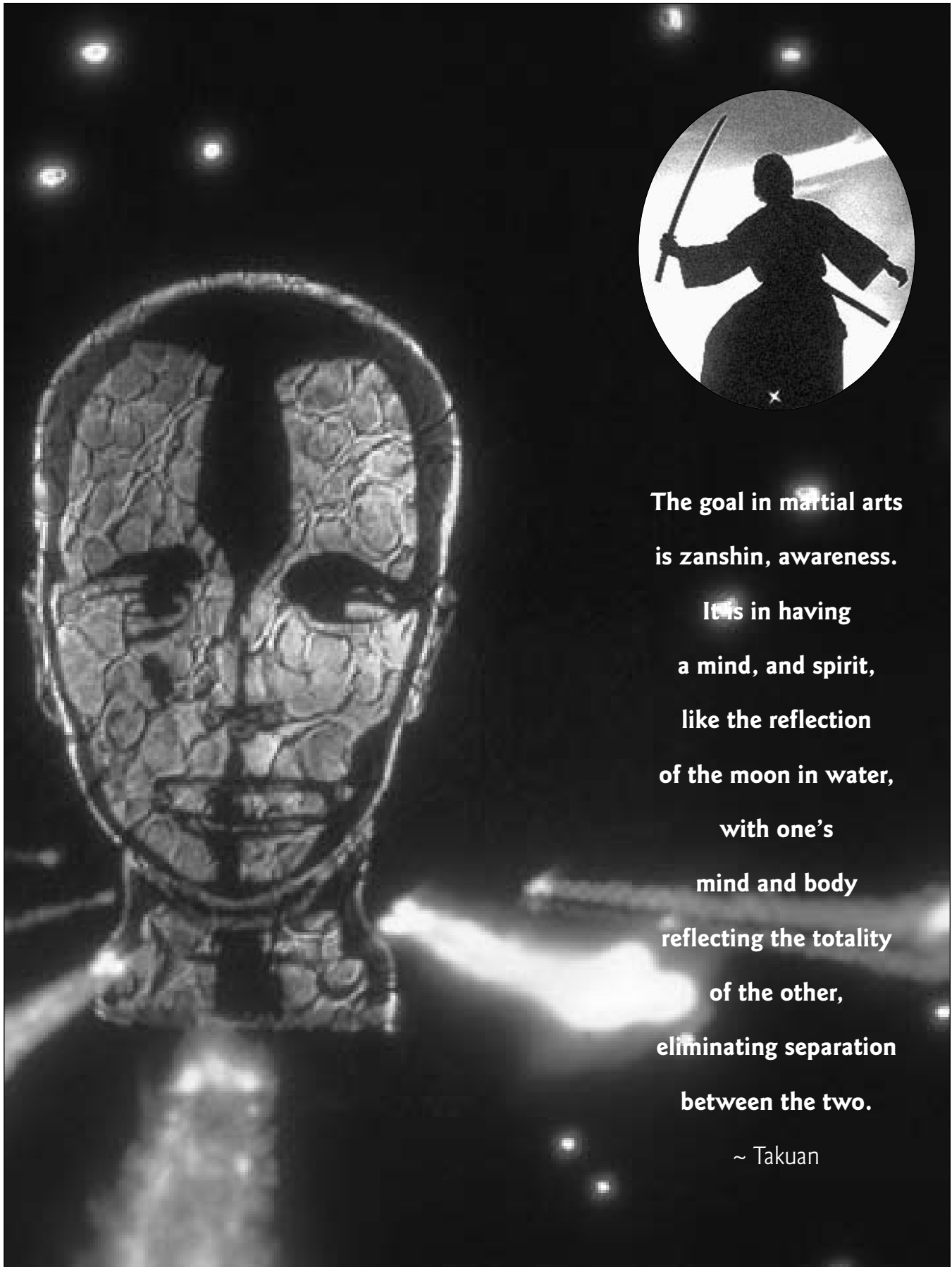
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**The goal in martial arts  
is zanshin, awareness.**

**It is in having  
a mind, and spirit,  
like the reflection  
of the moon in water,  
with one's  
mind and body  
reflecting the totality  
of the other,  
eliminating separation  
between the two.**

**~ Takuan**

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# SELF-TRANSFORMATION & THE MARTIAL ARTS IN THE AMERICAN CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

FREDERICK W. LOHSE III, M.A., ED.M.



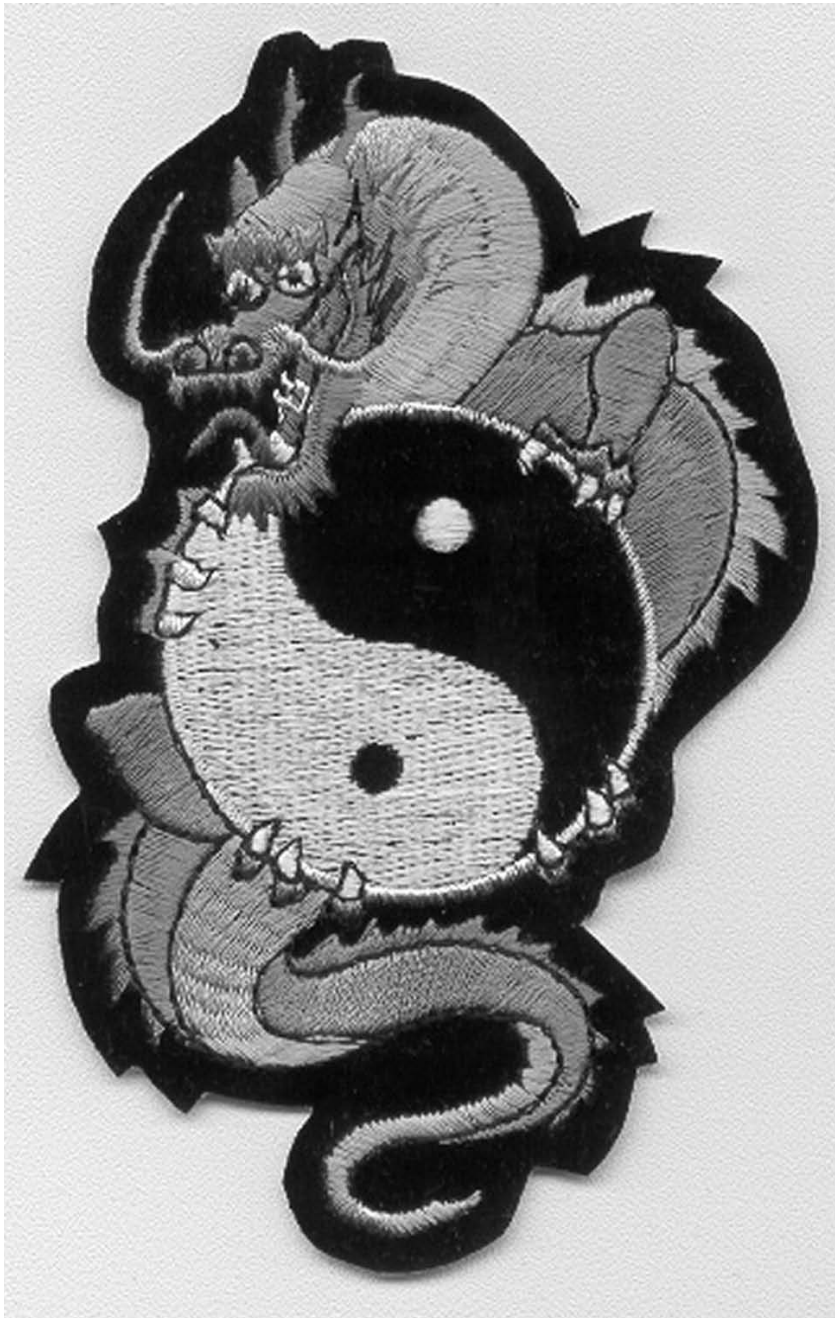
## INTRODUCTION

Our identities are created things. In developing them, we use material from the surrounding social environment. By identifying, or contrasting, ourselves with shared ideas and images, we construct an identity that is both salient to ourselves and understandable to those around us. Most discussion of the martial arts, both academic and popular, revolves around historical analysis or technical description. However, in our cultural context, these arts are not just a means by which people learn to fight. The dedication with which so many people, most of whom never use their learned skills to practical effect, pursue these arts points to something else active in their participation. Identity, as stated, is a created thing. In this paper, I will examine some aspects of how practitioners in this country use the martial arts as one means of constructing their narratives of Self.

In *Culture and Experience*, Irving Hallowell posits that an essential factor in the creation of an identity is separation, the distinction between Self and Other. To create a coherent image of Self, “it must be possible for the individual to react to himself as an empirical object, to identify and refer to himself in contradiction to other selves” (Hallowell, 1955: 82). This distinction, the objectification of the Other, allows the individual to position him or herself as separate and contained, a coherent object. It then permits the individual to act on this positioning. Without a defined Other, there can be no clearly defined Self, for there would be no separation between the Self and the environment. However, this is not simply a static dichotomy. It requires “not simply an awareness of a contrasting world, but a recognition of one’s own otherness in that world” (Crapanzano, 1992: 79), a recognition that the Self is also an object that exists in the environment. It is this recognition that allows for the development of a Self that can interact with other objects, other Selves, in the cultural environment. The creation of the Other, then, becomes a relational action. Through developing an understanding of what the Other is, and how it compares or contrasts with the Self, the individual can then create an idea of who he or she is.

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But how does this actually work? How does the identification of the Other help people create themselves? This relationship takes place in a complex set of social surroundings. It is embedded in what we refer to as culture, and is not just a bilateral relationship. The culture around the individual makes up the material from which this Other (and so the Self) is created. Through the act of defining the Other, we create something that can be pointed to and understood by the surrounding society. By clearly separating and distinguishing the Self from Others in the behavioral environment, or by identifying and merging with them, the Self can be defined and described in a way that is both valid to the individual and understandable to those in the cultural space around them (See Hollan, 1992: 94 for a further discussion of this act of definition). As part of our culture, the Asian martial arts are playing a greater and greater role as a defining element.



“There is hardly a community of any size in Europe and the English speaking lands in which there is no instruction available in one or more of the martial arts” (Skidmore, 1991: 129). In the United States, martial arts schools exist in virtually every small town in the country. Though originally a product of various Asian cultures, these arts have become an intrinsic part of our own cultural milieu. But why? The martial arts’ much discussed physical effectiveness is not really a valid reason. In *Warrior Dreams: The Martial Arts and the American Imagination*, John Donohue compares military combat systems and martial arts and finds martial arts in comparison “grossly inefficient” (Donohue, 1994: 27). They neglect technological developments in arms and armor, such as firearms, require extensive training time before reasonable proficiency is reached, and are usually trained in a highly stylized manner, one not always promoting combative efficiency. But more importantly, and regardless of how technically effective the martial arts are, few martial artists ever use their learned skills. They are citizens of a relatively safe society, one in which personal combat is fairly uncommon. Their skills are rarely, if ever, tested, and most martial artists know this. While it forms the backbone of the activity, learning to fight is not why most people train.<sup>1</sup>

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In his 1987 *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, Daniel Miller discusses form over efficiency. He writes that the perceived function of an object or activity, the meanings the culture assigns it and the forms these take, are far more important in the social arena than any actual level of efficiency. This is particularly true for martial arts. They are filling a cultural role, not necessarily a physical one. While the physical effectiveness of the martial arts is their most often discussed aspect, its validity, or lack thereof, is not essential to the experience. "Self-related experience . . . need not be true in order to be psychologically significant for the individual or his associates" (Hallowell, 1955: 96). The activity or experience gains power to help define the Self through perceptions of it as much as, or more than, through its actual attributes. Its significance is determined by how it is defined, by what it means to those who interact with it, more than by what is being accomplished. (As an example – a garbage collector accomplishes a much more useful task than a professional athlete, but the regard these two roles have in our culture assign higher status to the athlete.)

In our cultural environment, the martial arts have become one type of "Other" that the individual can use to create him or herself. But before the material, the cultural beliefs around the Other, can be used, this Other has to be created and defined. In this paper, I will first examine how the martial arts as a cultural product here in the US have been created. I will then take this creation and explore how it is then used in creating the identities of those involved in it.

#### CREATION OF OTHER:

##### THE ASSIGNING OF MEANING TO THE MARTIAL ARTS

The first part of this creation of the Other is separation. Defining the Self as a separate identity requires that there be a recognition of coherent identities and actions around the Self. Before these actions and identities can be assigned meaning, they must first be put in this position of distance. From there, moral or normative definitions can be assigned to them.<sup>2</sup> As far as martial arts are concerned, the initial position of distance is easy. Here in America, they are seen as Asian, something outside the culture, and so by extension outside the (American) Self. However, they still need to be fit into the cultural surroundings in some fashion. Some intelligible meaning must be assigned to them.

In bringing martial arts to this country, we have changed them. Essentially, we have "borrowed the story but not the culture" (Gillespie, 1995: 91). Instead, we have created our own story, one applicable to, and part of, our historical moment. Martial arts came into the United States accompanied by little or no historical background. This lack of historical precedent in the definition of the martial arts allowed for an almost completely local construction of their meaning. Examining the relationship between individual and Other, Vincent Crapanzano writes about how we manipulate ideas in the cultural surroundings. He refers to the Other being "recontextualized . . . treated as symptoms of that stereotype's contextualization. This process leads to a practical engagement with, or manipulation of, the other" (Crapanzano, 1991: 438). In other words, the Other must be defined in terms that are familiar in some way, so that it can be understood. Once this understanding is reached, this material may then be used, through relationship with it, to help define the Self.

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## MARTIAL ARTS AS AN ORIENTALIST SYMBOL

To a great extent, Americans have come to view Asian martial arts through the use of stereotypes. Therefore, we must first examine our culture's images of the East to understand how we have adapted martial arts here. These images form an initial set of concepts that can be used to construct meanings for the martial arts. But what do these concepts consist of? Culturally, we have little factual material or direct experience to use in forming them. Asian history is not a common requirement in our schools, and the United States is separated both geographically and culturally from the origins of these arts. Thus, our background is made up primarily of media images and rumor, popular novels, stories, fables, and disconnected snippets of history. In many ways, it is primarily a Western image.

The way we look at the East has long been a topic of anthropological discussion. Edward Said, whose work primarily focuses on the Middle East and not the Far East, coined the term "Orientalism" to describe our perceptions of it (Said, 1978). To summarize, his description of the Western vision of the East is one of essential backwardness, of technical (and cultural) inferiority, of questionable social mores, and of bizarre and unusual behavior. It is one of spirituality, mystery, sexuality, and magic. It is also one of history, age, and tradition, especially as viewed against the "modern" nature of the West. For example, when applied to a country like Japan, it pits the (equally stereotyped) current Japanese world, with its neon, business acumen and high technology, against a more traditional, and therefore more "real" Japan, one made up of movie and media pictures of Asia: monks, statues, incense, and various traditional forms of dress. In this construction, it is the West that has developed. It is no longer a time of gunslingers, castles and knights, or of superstition, here. But modernization has Westernized the East, rendered it fake in some way; the "real" East is its past, the time of samurai, geisha, and mysticism. The East, then, is not the West, and the West is modern. Yet even with certain negative aspects involved, like primitivism, this created East is somehow a very attractive image.

This is because in developing this image, the Orientalist does not primarily use material from the East: he or she uses cultural components from the known environment. As I stated above, the Other needs to be understood before it can be manipulated. To make understanding possible, it is created out of familiar stuff. Here, this "stuff" consists of things the individual, and the culture, feel are lacking in themselves. Some aspects of this can indeed be negative: primitivism, lack of technology or "advanced" culture, and lives "nasty, brutish, and short." However, this is only the surface. As Said writes, the East is also a "locale sympathetic to private myths, obsessions, and requirements" (Said, 1978: 170).

The material that makes up these images of the East is also the material of fantasy. It consists in large part of "daydreams packaged inside oriental clichés; harems, princesses, princes" (Said, 1978: 190). It includes honor, nobility, and a trust in tradition as well as a vague sense of magic, of mystery. These things are exciting, exotic, or somehow more real, holding deeper meaning than what we see in our daily lives. Hence the images of spirituality, tradition, mystery, familism, hard work, and collectivism. They come to life in our dichotomized visions of the East. We don't have them, this construct tells us, but Asians must, because they are different, they are the Other.

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Yet these are all things we value culturally. If you were to walk down a street and ask people if loving the family, hard work, sacrificing the self for society, or an understanding of and faith in our cultural background were good or bad things, you would get almost entirely positive answers. If you asked the question, you would also probably hear that we do not pay enough attention to these things nowadays. Through a projection of these values upon it, the East then becomes a representation of things we feel are necessary, but that we are losing or have lost.

Martial arts came here associated with these images, and they still carry them. They embody the idea of hard work reaping rewards for anyone who tries; they are mysterious and powerful; and they are associated with Eastern religions, spiritualism, inscrutable and wise monks on a distant mountain top, "enlightenment." They also extol a very Western vision of the primacy of the individual in the face of difficult odds.

Martial arts are associated with the development of phenomenal physical skills, strange mental powers, and the accumulation of deep wisdom passed down from the ancient masters (wisdom we perhaps abandoned to science?). In particular, these arts are seen as old, linked to a long past. In America, arts developed in Asia in this century or in the late 1800's gain imaginary histories thousands of years long.<sup>3</sup> This is not only a public perception. I remember surprising a student of mine when he asked how many hundreds of years old our kata were. That most had been reformulated sometime early in this century was not what he expected to hear. This is not unusual. Somehow, it is just not good enough for it to be relatively new, it must be something passed down from master to master since time immemorial. Though they are perhaps said to be lacking in our society, values like this attraction to tradition are very mainstream. They are things we feel we fundamentally need, but perhaps are missing. The martial arts have come to symbolize some of them. However, the values inherent in an Orientalist image of the East are not all the martial arts have come to symbolize.

This combination of the images we carry of the East and the lack of historical background the martial arts brought with them enables their meanings to be altered and adapted very quickly. Something with more local background, for example boxing, has not developed the same connotations. In many ways, boxing is very similar to some Asian martial arts. It is about fighting, it has a hard and technically elaborate training regimen, and it has a long tradition in our culture – the Marquis of Queensbury rules are older than most karate styles extant. However, boxing does not have a hole in its history or an association with the "mystical East" that allows us to make what we want of it. It may impart technical ability, but there is nothing mystical or transformative about it. We know it too well. In the Asian martial arts, there is something that our culture, and the individuals who participate in them, can use to create the images they desire without worrying about what it "really means" here. It is Other, and therefore takes on, can be given, meanings and ideas separate from "ours."



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THE DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING:  
MANIPULATING OUR IMAGES OF THE EAST

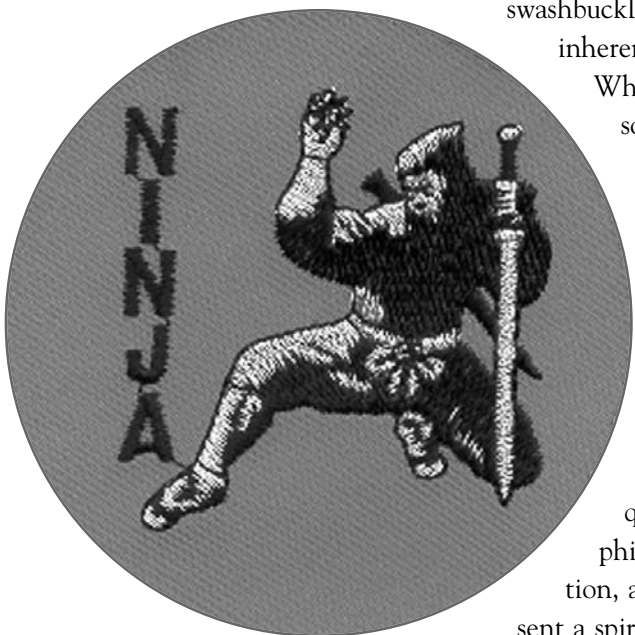
Using these images, and the lack of history accompanying them, we have created a multitude of meanings for them here. They have become associated with all sorts of cultural movements and supposedly subcultural activity within our society. As an example, I would like to point to their association with the women's movement, however difficult it is to define that term. Schools for women only, schools advertising women's self-defense classes, and syllabi emphasizing a feminist perspective that can be gained through training are all becoming more common. This is new. It accompanies the changes in the role of women in our society, and is definitely not part of these arts' meanings in their native environments. In contrast, in a dojo I trained in in Japan, the teacher gave a lecture one day about how women in the dojo should leave their social roles, the meekness and demure attitude common to Japanese women, at home. This was not a social agenda, however. He stated that the goal of this was to enable them to develop the spirit necessary for them to properly perform in their social role outside the dojo. For a woman joining the school, it was not a transformative process, but one reinforcing her cultural background. However, training in martial arts here is seen in some way to be a transformative act, one that gives power to the person involved.

Other associations with the martial arts abound. Current ideas of fitness, holistic healing, stress reduction, and the need for exercise have been enveloped in the image of martial arts: they will keep you healthy. They are also somehow spiritual: through training, the individual may become more connected to a spirituality that is different from our idea of church and god. Simultaneously, they encapsulate many of our society's concepts of gender and sexuality: while in popular magazines men are usually pictured in traditional training or wrestling garb, women are often dressed in sports bras, spandex, and other revealing clothing.

Martial arts have also come to dominate the modern media presentation of an action hero. The addition of them to existing hero myths changes the assumptions behind a hero, subtly. While the status of our older action heroes, like swashbucklers, cowboys, or knights, comes primarily from the hero's inherent personal attributes, the martial artists' come from training.

While it is a special, somewhat mysterious sort of training, in our society, it is a type of training ostensibly available to the individual in his or her hometown. In this way, the hero and the common person differ less in natural makeup than in a difference in experience, experience with this created Other, an experience the individual has potentially available to him or herself. Through this potential association, individual identification with the hero becomes easier.<sup>4</sup>

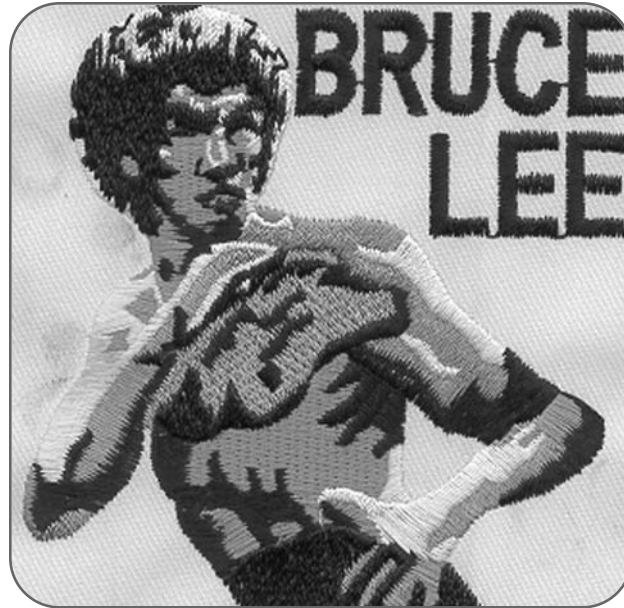
Different arts, or different schools, have come to represent different aspects of this set of values, much as there are different heroes for different people. As examples: taijiquan has been partially appropriated by New Age type philosophies and a lifestyle that can include macrobiotic diets, meditation, and an aura of peace and pacifism. Aikido has come to represent a spiritual quest, complete with Zen and an emphasis on passivity;





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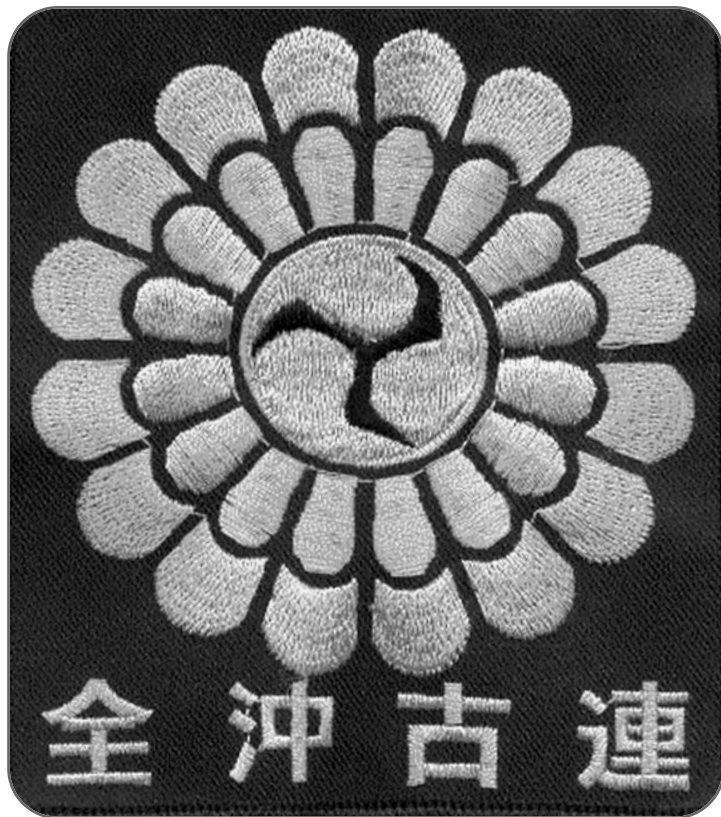
harmony; and developing a relationship, merging ki, with one's opponent and the world. Karate is often thought of as almost militarily regimented, perhaps because former military personnel introduced it here, with an emphasis on self-discipline, toughness, and focus. These concepts blend and change over time. In the 1940's, judo was thought of as a brutally effective and complete combat art. It is now considered a martial sport. All these variations are examples of a manipulation of the Other to fit it into an applicable role in the cultural surroundings, and all are constantly changing and adapting.



More importantly however, all these associations are also typically Western, typically American. They accompany changing desires and perceptions in our society. These meanings are certainly not the same as those the tradition in its place of origin holds. Its health-oriented perception aside, most of the Japanese martial artists I know, like most Japanese men, smoke. While some Asian martial artists are trained in traditional medicine, most assume the hospital is a faster and better place to get patched up. While very well disciplined, the karate dojo I have trained in in Japan and Okinawa were less regimented than most here. The aura of aloofness and inscrutability cultivated by some instructors here is replaced in Japan and China by a much closer personal relationship between teacher and student.

Items and actions can easily take on new meanings in different surroundings; to make sense of them, this is almost essential. I am reminded of walking into the home of one of my teachers here in the US and seeing an announcement for the results of a sumo tournament framed and hanging on the wall near a pair of rice sickles used as weapons in training. The closest comparative image I could think of was walking into a Japanese baseball coach's home and seeing a special edition sports page from the *Globe* (which the owner could read only a few words of) and a new Louisville Slugger displayed on the wall. Through changed associations, these things become valid as art and decoration. Both have meanings for their owners that in their place of origin may not be recognized, but that are shared by others in their current social surroundings.

This mutability of meaning is not surprising. Most martial artists in the US have little or no contact with the place of origin of their art. They speak no Asian languages and know little or nothing about these cultures outside the stereotypes and media images they bring through the door with them. They do not need to: these arts are now American. An image is formed, grounded in factual knowledge or not, and is then accessible, able to be acted on. It does not matter if there is real connection with the East, what matters is that the image is accessible, understandable, and usable.



**BLACK BELT CLUB**

#### ASSIGNING AND ADAPTING THE MEANINGS CREATED

In manipulating and adding to these images we have of the East to create meaning for the martial arts here, we include associations with certain desirable attributes from our own culture's mainstream. These are uniformly things we know but feel are not fully present in our culture, and by extension, in ourselves. The activity is thereby further rendered "Other" by the nature of the values it stresses, values desired but lacking. Taken as a whole, by using our perceptions of the East and combining them with certain mainstream values, we use the martial arts to create a firm niche in our culture for these ideas and values. The martial arts become a symbol for them, a symbol that can then be manipulated. Creating a meaning set for the martial arts here enables us to "transform that object or act into something other than it appears," taking something that is nominally about fighting and making it into something about discipline, spirituality, self-confidence, sexuality, or any of a number of other things (Crapanzano, 1992: 219). In theory, the ideals embodied could be positive or negative, enabling rejection or connection. In practice, in the martial arts, they are generally positive. They are things people here want to see in themselves.

In the summer of 1995, the late Matayoshi Shinpo, an Okinawan *kobudo* (armed martial art) instructor, said to me, "If Americans practice kobudo, then the kobudo they practice must be American in some way." He went on to say (emphatically) that this did not mean changing the forms of training, it meant that the people involved would think differently. As we are not Okinawan, it stands to reason that our meanings will not be Okinawan ones. Out of the available cultural material, we have created an action defined by its assumed nature and by the associations we put on it, as Other. It is turned into a vehicle for values we deem important but see as lacking in our culture or ourselves. Thus, martial arts gain a certain validity specifically from their Otherness, regardless of what they embody. They gain value from the perceived history behind them; since they have such a long tradition and have lasted, they must have some intrinsic value. Most importantly, they gain validity from the meanings they have come to represent. In this cultural moment, through both business and certain spiritual associations, there is value and power in the East. It "has something," and this is discussed openly in society. All these associations come into play in the creation of a local interpretation of the martial arts.

In *The Anthropology of Sport*, Kendal Blanchard notes that, "even a sport that has been introduced from a foreign source is very quickly redefined and adjusted to fit the norms and values of [local] tradition" (Blanchard, 1995: 53).

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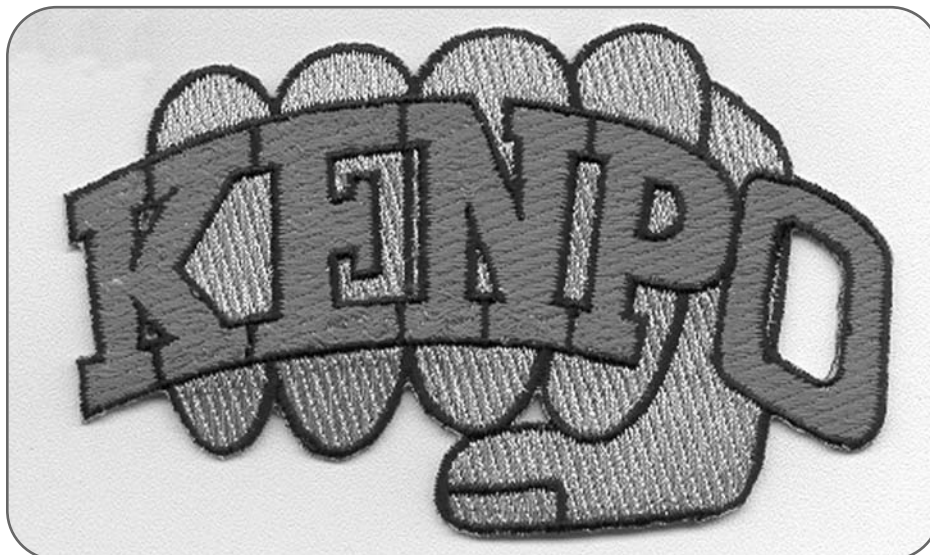
The martial arts have indeed become local. They embody many of our base cultural premises – hard work, discipline, individual achievement, and fitness – as well as some others we sense lacking but necessary – tradition, heroism, honor, and excitement. The Other has been created; it exists and is identifiable. It is also very much a part of our culture. It is ready to be used in creating the Selves of those who associate themselves with it. How, then, does this happen?

#### IDENTIFICATION WITH THE OTHER AS A PROCESS OF SELF-CREATION

Put simply, through association with what the martial arts have come to symbolize, the martial artist takes on these attributes in his or her construction of Self. Through participation in the martial arts, one comes to embody the attributes that our culture assigns this activity. People can become more heroic, self-sufficient, spiritual, sexy, healthy. Using the varied meanings I have discussed, people can work at crafting the individual Self they desire by associating themselves with those meanings most appropriate to their personal narratives of Self. This process takes place on two levels: the personal or internal level, and the social level. While the two are by no means separate, I will examine each here, as well as how they interact.

#### INTERNAL MECHANISMS OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN MARTIAL ARTS TRAINING

We must all make choices about how we live our lives. In our culture, these choices can describe to others who the person is and what he or she stands for. In *Modernity and Self Identity*, Anthony Giddens discusses lifestyles, sets of practices that “give material form to a particular narrative of self identity” (Giddens, 1991: 81). It is not uncommon to hear practitioners talk about the martial arts as “a way of life, not just something you do.” That training can come to be a lifestyle choice is particularly salient when sacrifices in other areas, due to time and energy commitments, are made. Here, as in making any such choice, meaning is found through “connecting one’s life up to some greater reality or story” (Taylor, 1989: 43). We know the contents of the story. How is the individual connected?



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Identification with these traits first comes through membership in a group that embodies them. The process of joining the organization or school is an act that signals to the individual that he or she is able to, and in the process of, taking the traits associated with that group and bringing them into the Self. Martial arts often highlight a number of personal and social issues for practitioners. But while issues like power, self-control, and dealing with aggression are indeed pertinent to those involved in martial practices, I would suggest that more important is the transformative process itself. The fundamental concern is that of the practitioner working on a closer fit between the current Self and his or her desired self-image. While this transformation often includes the issues above, it is the process of Self-creation that is essential.

In martial arts training, this transformative process is continual. Throughout the process of gaining expertise, one also gains rank in the in-group social structure of the school or style. As stated above, training is not always a development of combative skill. However, inside the school, the student progresses in ability with the specific forms of training of the style. With this demonstrable increase in ability, there is often a visible rank structure of some type denoting who is at what level in the group. Over time, the person training sees him or herself gaining ability, becoming more fluent with the forms of the style. He or she simultaneously sees this recognized by the surrounding community, as formally ranked status in the group is also gained. This increasing technical and social status acts as a private reinforcement of the validity of the achievement, as well as a public display of it. It shows the individual that the desired attributes are indeed being developed, and that others who identify with these values are recognizing this.

Mastery over the things that drew the person in, the images and ideas associated with the object, is therefore demonstrated by mastery over the object itself. This extends right down to movement, to the individual's body. Over time, the person's body itself becomes a symbol of membership in the school; by observing build and watching body movement and technique, a knowledgeable person can often determine the style a practitioner does. By extension, the body itself comes to symbolize possession of the traits inherent in that activity. Increasing status, as demonstrated by physical fluency, functions as both a reward and an incentive. Some mastery is being reached, and can be demonstrated. More awaits.<sup>5</sup> This reinforces the need to continue training, as well as the fact that the process of transformation is indeed happening, on a daily basis.

It is also important that this all takes place in a very formal and highly ritualized environment. In fact, martial arts schools here are often much more formal, especially given cultural mores, than schools in Asia. This remade formality and the snippets of language sometimes used serve to continuously define the environment as Other, reinforcing the continuity of the transformative process. Imagine a school where the students shook hands instead of bowing, wore American sport clothing, and translated all the terms used, including the name of the style, into English. (This might serve to give a closer approximation of some of the social surroundings of training in the culture of origin of a given martial tradition.) When taken outside their original cultural surroundings, the terms and traditions used take on meanings they did not have. Mastering the art's "cultural" aspects – the terms, formalities, the language – gives the practitioner yet another

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sphere of perceived expertise. A student of mine has commented on how his training has made him feel he has some understanding of Japanese culture, though he speaks no Japanese, has never visited or studied the country, and all his training partners are American. Realistically or not, the belief that he had gained knowledge and understanding that went outside the forms of the art itself was important to how he saw his participation. It became something that went outside the dojo, and gave him a greater understanding of his cultural surroundings. It is one way in which training has transformed how he sees his place in the world around him.

This formality and association with a foreign culture further separates the school from the outside world by making it more exotic. These aspects then combine with other formal attributes. Although they could easily (and often less expensively) be trained wearing shorts and a T-shirt, most martial arts are trained wearing uniforms. As a part of this uniform, there is often, through the nearly omnipresent belt system (developed in 1862 in Japan, specifically for the then new system of judo), a visible symbol of the practitioner's rank in the school as well as a patch or some other general symbol of group membership. To these trappings are added an element of danger. Due to the controlled nature of the environment, the actual daily element of danger in most training is probably no more than that of a rough basketball game, for there are certainly fewer serious injuries in most martial arts training than in a heavy contact sport like football. However, the aura is there.

This all adds up. This is a place of power, it says, a place where we will deal with issues that are important, serious, special. It is different from the rest of life. It has a special vocabulary, hidden meanings, secrets. A special environment is created, and its special nature continually reinforced by these formal attributes. The practitioner then earns rank and status within it. This combination serves to demonstrate to the practitioner that the attributes sought, those associated with training, are being brought into the Self, step by step.



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CROSSING FROM THE PERSONAL TO THE SOCIAL SPHERE:  
IN-GROUP SOCIAL STRUCTURE & IDENTIFICATION  
WITH THE TRAINING COMMUNITY

This combination also serves to create a corporate environment in which the student is easily identified as a member of the group. It creates a camaraderie sometimes likened to that of a military unit, a group of people that share something that is both demanding and “impossible to explain to an outsider.” Once accepted into this group, the individual is usually accepted unconditionally (community, another value we may see as lacking in our lives, is created here as well). A cross section of the dojo I train in includes a financial analyst, the owner of a contracting company, a teacher, a computer graphics designer, a graduate student in education, a barber, a painter, a food chemist, and a green house manager. In the larger society, these jobs all have various social rankings and usually move in different social circles. However, in the school the dictums of the larger society are exchanged for status that comes solely from participation. In this environment, it would not be unusual to see a forty-year-old senior executive giving respect to and willingly taking orders from, a twenty-year-old art student. These changes in roles increase both the special seeming nature of the training environment, as normal roles are exchanged for particular ones, and the separation of this environment from the larger society. It also helps to create a loyalty to the training community that is directly linked to the process of self-transformation.

Loyalty to a martial arts school or teacher is often a very strong thing. People do not like to hear their school or style criticized, even if this criticism is valid. Conversations, magazine articles, books, all extolling the virtues of one style versus another abound. It seems essential to many martial artists that their style be the most effective, the most original, or the “real thing” in comparison to some (usually) more modern “fake.” This might be important if certain results are desired. It would be most salient if the practitioners were engaged in regular combat. They are not, so these discussions of relative merit are usually theoretical or historical in nature. However, relative stylistic merit aside, the individuals involved have a lot invested in the group or style. Through time, membership, and commitment, it can come to symbolize the part of them they have put into training. Therefore, a criticism of the style can by extension be considered a criticism of the exponent him or herself. Attacking the group can amount to attacking the validity of the person involved.



However, demonstrating this loyalty both to the other members of the school and to the Self can also be important, in and of itself, to keep up the pursued process of transformation. To gain loyalty and acceptance from other members, the individual must demonstrate it in him or herself. Therefore, loyalty to the group or style is not only one means of defending the Self against possible attack, it also serves to re-enforce the connection to the activity in the individual. In turn, this demonstrates

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loyalty to the community that supports and assists that connection, and, therefore, the transformative process. This level of loyalty then is one means by which the individual signals to both him or herself and then to the larger society the process of transformation he or she is engaged in, while assuring continued support for it.

#### IDENTITY IN THE LARGER SOCIETY: SEPARATION, THE TRAINING COMMUNITY, & PARTICIPATION

This loyalty, along with the formality and exoticism discussed and the, often unspoken, recognition that what is being dealt with is a set of things that are highly valued but not seen as present in the larger society, helps to demonstrate the separation of the training community from the rest of the cultural environment, to define its boundaries. In turn, this definition helps the individual display to the surrounding society that “participation in training is . . . a statement of belief and belonging, a tangible signal that the individual holds certain ideals and that he or she holds them in common with a specific community” (Donohue, 1994: 74). The community imparts a sense of identity that is “separate and above” the larger society. It addresses important issues, and is associated with certain traits and ideas. The practitioner comes to possess these attributes by locating him or herself with it, in an environment that, by its very nature, is somehow seen as superior to the rest of society, different than everyday life.

Through all of this, the practitioner is, as I have said, engaging in a process of transformation. He or she is becoming a new person, identifying with a set of values that are in some way “higher order” but usually unavailable. This is part and parcel of the martial arts’ image here, perhaps their most attractive attribute. It is advertised in school windows; it is inherent in the image of the sickly young boy training for years, becoming strong, self-assured, and finally righting the wrongs done to him. It is very present in the day-to-day operation of schools. By associating closely with the Other, something (supposedly) from outside the culture and imbued with various but highly charged meanings, one can take on those nominally unavailable attributes. Through an individual’s action in the arena of the symbol, the “cultural symbol has become part of experience” (Stromberg, 1991: 122). It is no longer something out there to be observed, it is a part of the individual’s life, the narrative they use to describe the Self. “The symbol becomes an aspect of experience, and the believer becomes committed to a cultural system to which he or she feels a connection on the most personal level” (Stromberg, 1991:123). The symbol becomes real, the individual becomes the Other.

This is only possible through this process of doing. “Cultural models are merely ideas, premises by which people guide their lives, and only to the extent that people live their lives by them do they have force” (Hollan, 1992: 286). It does no good to say, “I wish I was this kind of person” or “I am this kind of person.” That is like sitting down to the TV and knowing all the while you could be playing with your kids, jogging, or teaching yourself something. You know that you would be better for it. Without action though, the knowledge of the symbol alone merely throws into sharper contrast the fact that one does not have the desired attributes. Through the



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time and effort involved in training, especially as this is heightened by a sense of separation from the larger society, the practitioner brings the attributes assigned to the martial arts into their life story. Through action, as Stromberg says, they become part of experience. In this way, they are used to help constitute the Self.

SEPARATION LEADING TO CONNECTION:  
ASSOCIATION WITH CORE CULTURAL VALUES

This is only part of the picture, however. We do not live lives that are wholly internal, or define ourselves solely by separation. The process of identification, and of transformation, also takes place through connection to the larger social environment. To have one's identity recognized and acted upon, the society must be able to understand the Self created. That the martial arts are created out of existing and understandable cultural motifs enables this process. Taking on the attributes associated with the martial arts creates a relationship with the Other that is also part of the individual's relationship with society. "It is not simply the interaction of two speech acts [Self and Other], but an interaction designed to be heard and interpreted by a third person" (Crapanzano, 1991: 437). Without this larger audience, there is no background against which to situate the Self. There is also no means to demonstrate that the Self has taken on the attributes that the martial arts have ascribed to it.

This process of demonstration can be done in different ways. On a general level, some people wait till they have gotten to know people fairly well before bringing up their training, perhaps due to some of our culture's stereotypes of what kind of people train. Others deal with this differently, and make much more immediate (though no less coherent) public statements. T-shirts and jackets announcing membership in a school are common. Training is often brought up in conversation in the same set as job and family. Either way, participation enters into the social sphere through the practitioner's relationships with it.

In taking on the role of the martial artist, the individual is essentially putting on a mask, a Self that is symbolic in the larger culture, and one that is easily recognizable to others.

Masking represents techniques of identity display and transformation, . . . and rely for their effectiveness on semiotic processes that reveal not only what is displayed, but also that display is taking place. The mask is an icon of identity. It is also a sign of the conventionality of the transformation. ~ Pollock, 1995: 593

While the author is talking about physical masks (like a uniform), the statement holds true for any culturally displayed identity. It must be displayed in ways that are recognizable to the larger culture, as I have discussed. The transformation it signals must also be one that is understandable. The key to this transformation is that the individual is not trying to separate from the larger culture. He or she is actually trying to demonstrate that they have taken on an identity that embodies certain commonly held values. However, this is not supposed to be easy. If it was, then these values would lose some of their special nature.

Hence the martial arts' perceived exclusiveness. Access to training is often seen as hard to obtain. In theory, this is true, the movies all show the difficulty of



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getting the “master” to accept a student. It can be true in some surroundings: a recommendation from both a member and someone the teacher respects outside the dojo is needed to join many *koryu* (old styles) in Japan, though this is unusual there as well. However, while some teachers interview people wishing to join their schools, this is very unusual in the United States. When I started karate training in college, I took a university physical education course. From there, I joined the campus club. Training there was of an extremely high caliber, but there were, very deliberately, no restrictions on who could join. In the United States, training is available in most any town. For a fee (which perhaps reinforces its validity to some), you can join most clubs or organizations. The desire is perhaps a metaphor, because if you want to increase in skill, you have to work hard; but many of the nonphysical benefits can be gained from a lower level of participation. Through it, one can still recognize oneself as a martial artist and situate oneself in the larger society within that role. This recognition enables others in the surrounding society to react to the individual based on the ideas associated with their assumed social role. In turn, this demonstrates again to the individual that they have indeed taken on the attributes the activity symbolizes.

#### CONNECTING INTERNAL AND SOCIAL ASPECTS OF SELF DEFINITION

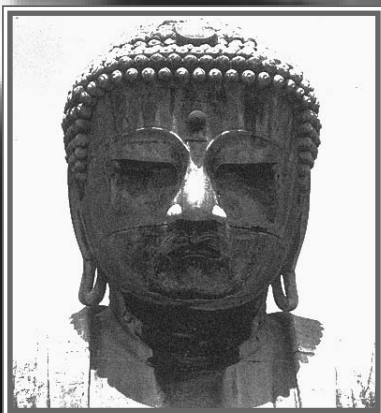
The process of identification is then two fold. The individual gains membership and status in a group that holds, symbolically, certain cultural values. The process of attaining proficiency in its forms and status within it demonstrates the adoption of these values and attributes internally. This group is then both separated from and reconnected to the larger society by the nature of its activity, its perceived exclusiveness, and the particular values associated with it. By association with this group, be it a particular or general participation in martial arts training, the individual is recognized and reacted to as someone who embodies them.

It is this recognition of membership in the group, and the ascription of values associated with it onto the individual, that enables the practitioner to use these associations on a social level. The identity is given social validity as it is reacted to by other members of the surrounding cultural milieu. This reaction is made possible by the essentially mainstream nature of the values espoused in martial arts training. They are understood, and so the participating individual can be reacted to in understandable ways. This last idea is important. If these values or attributes were fundamentally foreign, there would be no concrete way for people in the larger society to react to them. Any attempt at Self construction using them would be met by confusion instead of the mechanisms we see at work here.

#### CONCLUSIONS

The Other, then, is created. It is created out of familiar material. The martial arts offer an almost unique opportunity for this creation. They are associated with our visions of the East, visions that are in general positive, and made in part from fantasy. They are also historically unconnected. Therefore, we can make of them what we will. So, as they are created, meaning is given to them. However, this meaning is not a unique thing. Meanings were, and are, adapted to fit open niches in the existing cultural surroundings. From these niches, meanings can be fit into individual needs and personal narratives of Self.

**The development  
of a valued Self  
is an essential action.  
We all do it, with  
different things.  
Jobs, family, hobbies,  
religion, clothing,  
education, language,  
. . . all can serve as  
signals to other people  
about who we are,  
signals drawing on signals  
to other people  
about who we are,  
signals drawing on  
sets of commonly  
held assumptions.**



Once we have this Other to work with, the individual can use it to create an identity. "Social action is the result of a process by which public events are turned into private representations and acted on, thereby creating new public events" (Strauss, 1992: 16). The public event is the meaning and values associated with the martial arts. The private representation is the emotional attachment, the sense of transformation and the identification with certain values that membership in training helps to develop. The new public action is how the identity assumed works in relationship with other people. They respond to the martial artist in certain understandable codes and make assumptions about their attributes and personality, their identity. Thereby, an identity embodying certain cultural values is created and reinforced. This social interaction further assists in the assumption of these attributes in the practitioner, as he or she is treated as a person having them. This in turn helps continue to create the Other culturally, to reinforce the values associated with it, to keep it current in the social environment.

In deconstructing the process of identity development this way, however, it is easy to get lost in the theory. It is easy to assume from this description that people who are involved in martial arts training are narcissistic, using a cultural object to create in themselves a sense of superiority. This is an assumption that might have no solid foundation, since I have discussed the practical uselessness of the martial arts in daily life. But this is not the case. In his examination of the Indian martial art of kalarippayattu, Phillip Zarrilli states, "a martial practice . . . is one way of crafting a particular self, a culturally, historically specific pathway to self-realization" (Zarrilli, 1994: 13). That is indeed what is happening here.

The benefits from training are tangible. They include reduced stress, better fitness, and more self-confidence, among other things. While technical ability depends on many factors, including fitness, type of training, and experience, many martial artists become more capable of protecting themselves. Just because the development of good combative skills is not essential for the construction of identity I am discussing in this paper does not mean it is not a goal for many practitioners. However, these are not the only benefits. The development of a valued Self is an essential action. We all do it, with different things. Jobs, family, hobbies, religion, clothing, education, language, all can serve as signals to other people about who we are, signals drawing on signals to other peo-

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ple about who we are, signals drawing on sets of commonly held assumptions. Any of them can be used in a similar way. Due to their lack of history and cultural background here, martial arts can enable us to create a place for things in our society, and by extension ourselves, we may see as lacking. At the same time, they are active and engage issues of confidence, dedication, conflict, and power that we all deal with daily. They open up opportunities many people could otherwise find lacking to engage these things and perhaps transform through this. To assume these traits are not valid for the participant is to assume that none of our constructed identities are valid, that family, job, and skills, are all just image.

The construction we have made of martial arts in America allows for transformation in certain specific ways, through actions charged with emotion and a sense of Otherness. It enables change and separation from, perhaps a sense of power over, our culture, and at the same time connection with some of its core values. This is not to say that these things are not available from other sources, or that all martial arts training will confer them. But through the creation of a very specific Other, and then identification with it, both internally and in the larger society, the martial arts here have become means of creating a narrative of Self that takes something nominally foreign and uses it to embody and display some core cultural values. Through creating this Other, we do create in and of ourselves.



#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The issue here is that this technical knowledge is hardly ever used. I have trained for over twelve years, and haven't been in a fight since I was ten. This is not unusual. A friend's mother, watching us pound on each other in his yard day after day, remarked one spring, "Michael, why don't you just get mugged once every five years? It'd be less painful, and you could get it over with all at once." Obviously it's not about that. It is interesting to note that in Japan, the idea of training for self-defense is practically unknown. I asked about forty students in three schools there one summer about this, and none answered that they had started training to learn to defend themselves.

<sup>2</sup> For a deeper discussion of these kinds of orientations, see Hallowell, 1955.

<sup>3</sup> This imaginary history can become quite creative. I know of one school that advertises a 1,500-year martial tradition, and the combination of eight different styles of martial arts into itself. Unfortunately, the oldest of the eight styles named, and not necessarily extant, is about six-hundred-years old; and the youngest only about eighty. Most of the Japanese arts common now are quite young: aikido was put together in the 1920's; karate as we know it now came to Japan from Okinawa in the 1920's and had only been known on Okinawa in that form for less than one hundred years; judo was created in the 1860's; and taekwondo was formulated in Korea from some existing material and Japanese karate during and after the Japanese colonial period.

<sup>4</sup> See Donohue, 1994, for a more in-depth examination of the association between martial arts and hero figures.

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<sup>5</sup> This may explain the attrition rate at certain levels. When black belt, a grade considered a beginner's grade in Japan, is reached, there is a noted propensity for people to stop training. Perhaps at this point they feel a permanent mastery of the cultural material has been reached.

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