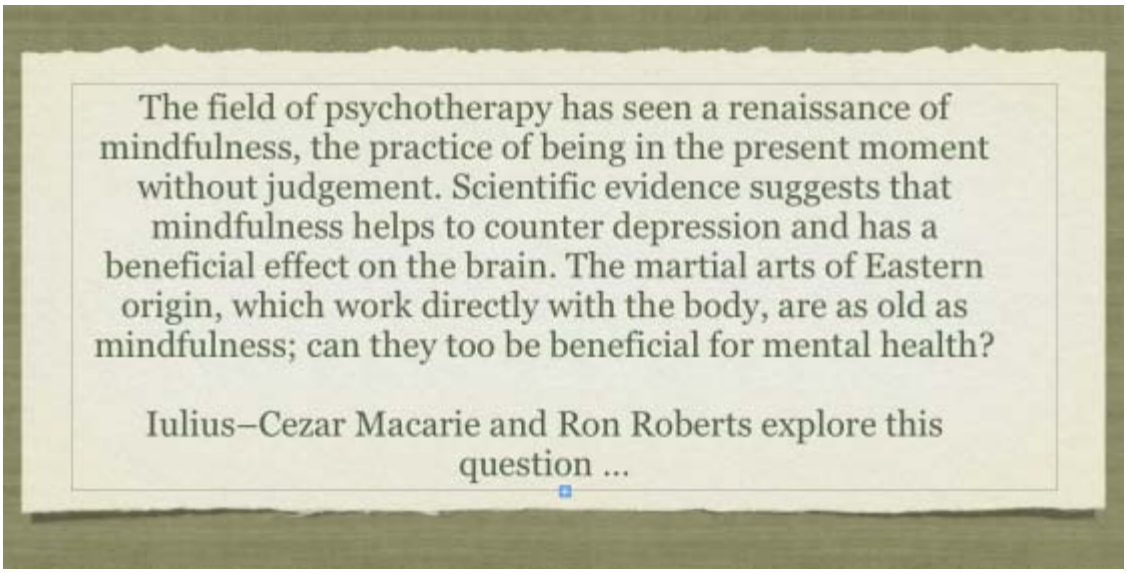
Contemporary Psychotherapy

Volume 2 No 1, Spring 2010:

Martial Arts and Mental Health



Iulius-Cezar Macarie and Ron Roberts

Ronny Yu: *"Martial arts are a spiritual challenge, not a physical one."*

Jet Li: *"When you learn something, always use the heart"*

In the East, systematic martial arts began some 3000 years ago – in what is now Sri Lanka – and gradually spread northwest to China, India and Korea (Corcoron & Farakas, 1983).

Martial Arts Masters have transmitted from generation to generation their metaphysical teachings of what Western psychology refers to as the 'power within' each individual. Eastern Indian philosophies and religions transmitted this concept to schools of thought in China (Jou, 1981) where it came to be known as Chi (Qi), later entering Japan (around the 7th century), where it was named Ki, (Seitz, 1990). In the West, martial arts such as Karate, Kung Fu, Ju-Jitsu, Aikido, Tae-Kwon-Do and Judo are invariably seen as the arts of throwing, kicking and punching, and as '…naught but a killing present, anger past, and misery to come, in the course of one who studies these arts' (Shaler, 1979; cited by Weiser, Kutz and Kutz, 1995). Given that popular culture has focused on the physical side of these skills – breaking bricks and bones in the guise of mass entertainment – this is not surprising. To its practitioners however, martial arts provide much more. Bruce Lee (1997) distilled this to three areas – health promotion, cultivation of mind and self-protection – while others (*e.g.* Wong, 1996) have considered up to five – self-defence, health and fitness, character training, mind expansion and spiritual development. That martial arts promote mental as well as physical health has come to the attention of Western scientists only in the last thirty years, with the acknowledgement that they also embody a system of moral values (*e.g.* respect property, be faithful and sincere, exert oneself in the perfection of character), which together can inculcate physical and mental relaxation, control of mind and body, and increases in self-confidence (Weiser *et al*, 1995).

Evidence of the effectiveness of martial arts in producing affective, cognitive and behavioural benefits has come from a number of studies. Improvements in self-esteem (Fuller, 1988), a more positive response to physical challenge (Richard and Rehberg, 1986; Trulson, 1986), greater autonomy (Duthie, 1978), emotional stability and assertiveness (Konzak and Boudreau, 1984) and reductions in anxiety and depression (Cai, 2000) have all been associated with martial arts training. Konzak and Boudreau (1984) have also drawn attention to the social benefits of such behavioural change – in particular the relationship between martial arts practice and aggression.

Martial arts wisdom has it that after consistent practice one becomes less impulsive and aggressive towards others. The Shaolin moral code for example comprises twelve ethics, ten forbidden acts and ten obligations. Patience, insight and calmness accordingly are considered pre-requisites of good Kung Fu (Wong, 1981). In Shotokan Karate, for instance, the Dojo Kun (a code or set of rules) is part of the moral values transmitted from ancient times and has the role of reinforcing the pacifistic urge that lies at the heart of the martial arts. This reminds students of the right attitude, frame of mind and virtues to strive for within and outside the dojo or training hall. One of these rules is: 'Respect others' (The Dojo Kun, International Okinawan Goju Ryu Karate-do Federation, 2009).

Several studies point to the effectiveness of traditional martial arts in reducing aggression. Zivin *et al* (2001) for example paired 60 middle-school boys on problematic behaviour

profiles in a treatment group and a waiting list control group. The treatment group participated in school-linked training in traditional martial arts. Schoolteachers were asked to rate the students on impulsiveness, resistance to rules, self-concept and inappropriate behaviour. After three months of training, the students within the treatment group had improved their behaviour in class and all exclusions following the onset of the study (six in all) occurred in the control group. The teachers rated the martial arts students as less impulsive and less aggressive towards other colleagues. Other studies (*e.g.* Nosanchuk, 1981) provide similar evidence that training in martial arts reduces aggressiveness.

Lakes *et al* (2004) argue that these benefits are a consequence of enhanced self-regulation – historically known in martial arts as self-control – developing will and discipline. Willpower is considered important not only for enabling the student to continue with arduous training but also for improving personality and performance inside and outside the training arena; consistent training itself, coupled with a sincere attitude towards the moral principles of martial arts, contributes to strengthening willpower – a two-way process between the martial arts and the student involved in the process whereby 'one exerts oneself in the perfection of character' (Rule No. 5 from Dojo Kun, Japan Karate Association, 2009).

Other researchers (Cai, 2000; Weiser, 1995) have explored some of the physical as well as psychological gains emanating from martial arts training. Myeong *et al* (2002) examined the effects of Qi-Gung on heart-rate variability in sedentary subjects and Qi-Gung students. They found that Qi-training, an aspect of Chinese martial arts which seeks to stimulate and channel the harmonious flow of internal and external energy through the body – familiar to westerners through the art of Tai Chi – helped invigorate Qi-Gung students' cardiovascular systems as well as their mental health.

Research has also utilised the distinction between so-called 'soft' (internal) and 'hard' (external) schools. The difference lies in the way energy (Ki, or Qi) is propagated through the body towards a target. The 'soft' martial arts (*e.g.* Tai-Chi-Chuan) may be expressed in a slow and gentle manner, with force cultivated internally which, properly applied, may be used to deflect or redirect an attacking opponent's energy. The 'hard' martial arts, when demonstrated, allow one to see the force visibly, and one can literally hear the vibration of air caused by the application of force. Knoblauch (1985) examined these two constructs to see whether they had any influence on the selection of a martial arts style. Using the California Personality Inventory (CPI) he found significant differences between participants from both 'soft' and 'hard' martial arts styles. The students that practised an external style showed a more dominant and competitive personality than those who practised an internal style. Care however is needed in interpreting these results owing to the possible selection bias of the author in recruiting participants to the study. It is also important to remember that some martial arts (*e.g.* Shaolin Kung Fu, Goju Ryu and Shotokan Karate) have aspects that are both soft and hard.

Despite these putative benefits, few mental health professionals have countenanced a role for martial arts in promoting mental well being – either for practitioners or clients. R.D. Laing – the radical Sixties psychiatrist better known for his challenges to biological psychiatry – is a notable exception. According to his biographer, Bob Mullan (1995), Laing saw martial arts training as indispensable for psychotherapists. Arguably the physical self-confidence that comes from training can free therapists from acting on the basis of any fear they might have of physical attack. Belief in the dangerousness of those who seek mental health services is a prominent stereotype which, if rendered inactive, would likely entail a reduction in the numbers of clients tranquilised to calm such fears. It is of interest therefore that Weiser *et al* (1995) have considered the psychotherapeutic aspects of martial arts practice and its value to verbal psychotherapy. They contend that the therapeutic effects of martial arts training can be compared to those of verbal psychotherapy and suggest practice of martial arts as a supplement to verbal psychotherapy. Both disciplines seek to gain an understanding of one's character 'with the aim of growth toward a new and stronger way of being in the world' (Weiser *et al*, 1995:119). Other researchers (*e.g.* Richman and Rehberg, 1986) have argued that the longevity of martial arts are a testimony to their psychological worth, and have compared the role of the martial arts instructor or Master to that of a psychotherapist (see Parsons, 1984 for a discussion of the occupational similarity between psychoanalyst and martial artist). In agreement with Parsons, Nardi (1984) finds that the skills of psychotherapists and martial artists complement each other. Nardi also finds analogous principles in both: for example, the values of rinkiohen (adaptability) and mushin (no-mind) found in the Samurai code of Bushido have relevance for effective practice in psychotherapy. Likewise, Reinhardt (1985) links Aikido (a Japanese martial art) to the Feldenkrais method – an integrative therapy promoting self-knowledge through physical movement – pointing out that the two merge in therapeutic interventions such as movement therapy.

Despite the positive picture painted by the above review, little research has been conducted into the application of martial arts as a psychotherapeutic intervention (Fuller, 1988). Madenlian's (1979) account is one of few comparative studies to examine the effect of structured martial arts training (in Aikido) alongside conventional psychotherapies (group or family therapies) on pro-social behaviour and academic performance. The results favoured Aikido over psychotherapy. Aikido principles (centeredness, extension and blending) have also been applied by Heckler (1984) with the aim of reinstating self-awareness in distressed patients. This line of work places martial arts in line with traditional somatopsychic therapies (Fuller, 1988) such as the Alexander Technique (Alexander, 1969), structural integration (Rolf, 1977), bioenergetics (Lowen, 1975), and dance therapy (Klein, 1983), all concerned to re-establish psychological growth in distressed and non-distressed patients through appropriate physical movements. The basic principle employed by these methods is that emotional and interpersonal maladjustments are reflected in bodily sensations, and can be corrected through appropriate physical movements.

Although traditional martial arts offer the prospect of positive psychological change to their students and produce beneficial psychotherapeutic effects when practised outside their original culture (Fuller, 1988), how much of the original teachings are correctly understood and interpreted remains an open question. There are two problems that must be faced when conducting any study about an Oriental martial art in a Western situation: understanding the arts as Oriental arts and understanding these arts in a Western context. Based on Fuller's (1988) review, Columbus (1991) noted that research into the benefits of martial arts has been carried out using positivist methods of investigation which, he says, are less relevant when it comes to understanding Oriental styles of thinking/acting, heavily influenced as they are by Zen Buddhism and Taoism, neither of which are easily grasped from a positivist perspective. In agreement with this both Adler (2003) and Glassford (1987) argue that statistics cannot offer insights into the deep meanings of Oriental teachings and that the truth and value of these systems can only be truly realised through experience.

The approach to life that Eastern practices such as yoga, meditation and martial arts (Konzak & Boudreau, 1984) offer to their adherents has proved attractive to many who are dissatisfied with the consumerist and materialist values that are prevalent in the West and that generate so much unhappiness. Since the 1960s and 1970s in particular there has been a tremendous growth in these practices. The growth in popularity of martial arts would seem to indicate that, both as a discipline and as a value system, they have something to offer. What this is may be considered on the one hand to be a product of their attention to affective, cognitive and behavioural characteristics (Lakes and Hoyt, 2004), and on the other, morality, non-violence and enlightenment (Becker, 1982). In short, they offer a way of being, a journey of self-discovery to cultivate our human potential – a means to relate better to oneself, others and the wider world. As Lao Tzu remarked "by changing ourselves we change the world" (Pau, 2008).

"The ultimate aim" (of the martial arts)… "lies not in victory or defeat, but in the perfection of the character of its participants" (Gichin Funakoshi quoted in Layton (2001).

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Images: Shotokan and Zen in the garden by Eole