

# The Monomyth of Martial Arts

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## More than a Hobby

While the martial arts provide an effective means to physical fitness, many avid practitioners regard their arts as more than mere exercise. Although martial artists enjoy substantial physical rewards such as increased flexibility, improved cardio-vascular health, increases in strength, and improved coordination, many feel that they also gain mental and even spiritual rewards from their art. Instructors tout tenants such as self-control, courtesy, integrity, perseverance, and indomitable spirit, values that clearly go beyond athleticism; however, how these values are transferred to students in the dojang is difficult to ascertain since no two students learn them in exactly the same way. Many instructors in the United States explain that the martial arts are not a religion as they teach beginners how to bow and meditate; the student often recognizes that there is a dimension to their art that goes beyond the physical realm to accomplish something with a higher meaning, but it is difficult for them to define what makes their martial art more than a hobby or a sport. For many traditional practitioners, the martial arts provide something that is missing from contemporary society. So what is this missing element that the arts supply? Examining the theories of anthropologist, Arnold Van Gennep, and mythologist Joseph Campbell may provide insight into the question.

Quite possibly, the practice of traditional martial arts provides an archetypal rite of passage that our modern society lacks.

The Australian aborigines had their walkabout tradition in which adolescents left their homes to survive alone in the wilderness. Black Elk described the Native American vision quests experience in which initiates left society for two or three days after a sweat lodge purification ritual for a period of deep prayer, observation, and fasting.<sup>1</sup> Maasai warriors of Kenya could expect to kill a lion with nothing more than a spear and undergo a circumcision as part of the rite of passage to join the warrior class.<sup>2</sup> Although modern rites of passage do exist, they do not require the same level of sacrifice and commitment as pre-industrial traditions.

In modern culture, rites of passage have generally gone through a process of disintegration, often only retaining traces of those elements that were once part of a full-bodied rite of passage. One may see the remnants of ancient rituals in such things as fraternity hazings, high school graduation ceremonies, or debutante balls. In some cases, religious or ethnic groups have sought to maintain and strengthen traditional rites of passage (e.g. the bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah, the quinceañera etc.), or to create new rites of passage to help their youthful members achieve maturity (this has been, for example, an important development in many African-American communities in the United States). Because rites of passage are not often an integral part of contemporary society, people may decide to create their own rituals. Sometimes this is done with a great deal of creativity and respect for tradition... Other times, this is done on a very ad hoc and impromptu basis,

especially in adolescence, by individuals who are unconsciously acting out certain elements of rites of passage (especially the separation and liminal phases), but not including an incorporation phase back into the society. One sees this sort of thing in adolescents who engage in substance abuse, gang activity, risky sexual behaviors, or other forms of reckless endangerment. The missing element in these cases is almost always the presence of mature individuals, themselves having passed the threshold into adulthood, who can help these adolescents make a safe journey across the great divide. For older individuals, the passage from one stage of development to the next phase (e.g. early adulthood to midlife), may also occur in the unconscious, but have a better outcome by its being made conscious through active work in psychotherapy, the arts, or other forms of therapeutic or symbolic activity.<sup>3</sup>

As our society laments the “sense of entitlement” of modern youth, it is interesting to note that modern rites of passage accepted by society (high school graduations, weddings, bar mitzvah, etc.) require little in the way of sacrifice or risk. In most instances, initiates in modern rites of passage need do little more than show up in order to transition from one stage of life to the next. The results of this “disintegration” of the rite of passage experience are many. Psychologists such as James Neil, from the Centre for Applied Psychology at the University of Canberra note the lack of cultural rites of passage as one of the root causes of various societal ills. Neil makes this view clear when he states,

Adolescent identity development has traditionally involved culturally-guided rites of passage. In modern Western society, there is a lack of such experiences

available to young people. The prevalence of problem-behaviours and psychological distress is symptomatic of adolescents who feel ill-prepared for the rigours of adulthood in the 21st century.<sup>4</sup>

Aside from Neil, "many writers, from social psychologists to family therapists, bemoan the lack of ceremonies in modern society to mark the transition into adulthood"<sup>5</sup> and note that, "in many ways our present day Western civilization is an exception in the history of man because of its lack of rites of passage for the young adolescents."<sup>6</sup> Though some formal rites do exist (Confirmation, Bar Mitzvah, graduation, driver's license), most young people are left to make or discover their own challenges or rites of initiation."<sup>7</sup> On the surface, the martial arts fill a societal void by providing a safe rite of passage ritual that is lacking in modern society, but the significance of the activity runs much deeper, possibly to the mythic roots of human experience.

In order to analyze how the martial arts relate to ancient archetypes and rites of passage, it is helpful to examine the ideas of two particular scholars, Joseph Campbell and Arnold Van Gennep. The groundbreaking French anthropologist, Arnold Van Gennep first coined the term "rites of passage," when he wrote a book, *Rites de Passage* in 1909. In this innovative work, Van Gennep identified the following stages to a rite of passage: a pre-liminal stage of segregation and separation from the community, a liminal stage of transition from one status to the next, and a post-liminal stage of reintroduction to the social order with a new standing.<sup>8</sup> Joseph Campbell became the preeminent comparative mythologist of the twentieth century when he wrote *The*

Hero with a Thousand Faces in 1949. In this work, Campbell analyzed myths from around the world, and using Van Gennep's ideas, discovered that myths from all cultures followed the same basic patterns, or archetypes. Campbell discovered that the basic mythic pattern for what he referred to as the Hero's Journey had striking similarities to Van Gennep's rite of passage. Campbell points out these similarities when he says,

The structure and something of the spiritual sense of this adventure can be seen already anticipated in the puberty or initiation rituals of early tribal societies, through which a child is compelled to give up its childhood and become an adult-to die, you might say, to its infantile personality and psyche and come back as a responsible adult. This is a fundamental psychological transformation that everyone has to undergo...To evolve out of this position of psychological immaturity to the courage of self-responsibility and assurance requires a death and a resurrection.<sup>9</sup>

Campbell found that whether discussing the English Arthur, the Greek Oedipus, or the Korean Čumong, heroes from the mythology of all cultures follow the same basic steps in their quests. Campbell labeled this idea that all myths follow the same steps the "monomyth." Campbell's steps to the hero's journey, which were very similar to VanGennep's stages of a rite of passage, were: departure, initiation, and return. Within each of these steps, Campbell highlighted symbolic milestones that the mythic hero underwent in order to progress through his/her quest. By analyzing martial arts from the standpoint of the monomyth, we

can reach an understanding of how martial arts allow practitioners to experience their own hero's journey as well as succeeding in a meaningful rite of passage.

## The Departure

### The Call to Adventure

In the course of his studies, Campbell discovered that the archetypal process of the hero's journey could serve as a model for modern people to make their own journeys of self-discovery. As he says,

The whole sense of the ubiquitous myth of the hero's passage is that it shall serve as a general pattern for men and women, wherever they may stand along the scale. Therefore it is formulated in the broadest terms. The individual has only to discover his own position with reference to this general human formula, and let it then assist him past his restricting walls. Who and where are his ogres? Those are the reflections of the unsolved enigmas of his own humanity. What are his ideals? Those are the symptoms of his grasp of life.<sup>10</sup>

Campbell labels the first step of the departure phase, a "Call to Adventure." In this part of the monomyth, "The hero is called to adventure by some external event or messenger. The Hero may accept the call willingly or reluctantly."<sup>11</sup> In mythology and legend, this is the phase where Arthur pulls the sword from the stone or Odysseus receives a message requesting that he join the attack on Troy. It is "...the point in a person's life when they are first given notice that everything is going to change, whether they know it or not."<sup>12</sup>

People are called to the martial arts in various ways.

Sometimes the call can come from a newspaper story or a local poster advertising a neighborhood martial arts class. Other times the call comes when a friend or family member invites a loved one to join a class, and sometimes the call comes when someone wants to change their lot in life by learning self-defense. No matter how the call comes, the important element is that the call to adventure marks the point at which everything changes for the hero. The hero finds his/her "...spiritual center of gravity (transferred) from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown."<sup>13</sup> The unknown zone in martial arts is the world of the dojang. Although it does not have the fantastical elements of myth and legend, to most beginners, the culture, expectations, and actions found in the dojang are outside of the every-day world. In addition to showing respect for the training hall, martial artists symbolically leave their every-day lives behind when they bow and enter the dojang. For those martial artists who treat their craft as more than a hobby, the call to adventure-whatever it was that made them first bow and enter a dojang, truly changes their lives.

### **Refusal of the Call**

The heroes of many myths initially refuse their call to adventure. Arthur initially places the sword back in the stone, and Odysseus feigned insanity because he did not want to leave home. "Often when the call is given, the future hero refuses to heed it. This may be from a sense of duty or obligation, fear, insecurity, a sense of inadequacy, or any of a range of reasons that work to hold the person in his or her current circumstances."<sup>14</sup>

Like mythic heroes, beginning martial artists do not always start their journeys without hesitation. Sometimes they fear injury, or they do not believe that they can be successful in the activity. Often, they need extra encouragement or a gentle push to get started. However they accomplish it, they must heed the call to adventure because, as Campbell stated in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*,

Refusal of the summons converts the adventure into its negative. Walled in boredom, hard work, or 'culture,' the subject loses the power of significant affirmative action and becomes a victim to be saved...All he can do is create new problems for himself and await the gradual approach of his disintegration.<sup>15</sup>

Finding a way to get past their fears and inhibitions symbolically represents the hero's decision to take charge of his/her destiny rather than accept life as it is. When martial artists overcome their fear and insecurities to begin their studies, they are also making a decision to change something within themselves.

### **Supernatural Aid**

Once they have received the call to adventure, the heroes of myth receive help and mentorships in order to complete their quests. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell notes that:

the first encounter of the hero journey is with a protective figure (often a little old crone or old man) who provides the adventurer with amulet against the dragon forces he is about to pass... What such a figure represents is the benign, protecting power of destiny.<sup>16</sup>



Arthur had Merlin the wizard to guide him, and Athena, the goddess of wisdom, mentored Odysseus. In the martial arts, instructors and senior students mentor the beginners. Although martial artists know that their mentors do not have supernatural powers, the abilities of advanced martial artists can seem almost magical, especially for beginning Western students who lack knowledge about metaphysical concepts such as ki energy. In regards to the teacher/ student relationship, one can also note that the mythic supernatural mentors most often strove to teach the hero a proper way to live. In the myths, Merlin taught Arthur how to rule with wisdom and justice. Athena helped Odysseus learn the value of using his intellect in order to solve problems rather than mere brawn. The best martial arts masters also strive to teach their students a way of living that goes beyond martial skill. A master's ability to teach the philosophical concept of *do* (the way) makes him/her more than a coach. The way, or "*do*," that martial arts mentors give to their students also helps students to succeed in life. The martial arts master who teaches "*do*" (the way), whether teaching taekwondo, hapkido, kendo, judo, or kumdo, accomplishes the same purpose as the supernatural mentors in the monomyth. They teach a way of thinking and acting that allows others to be better people and find success later in life.

In most myths, supernatural mentors give heroes magical talismans to help them on their journey. Mythologists recognize that these magical items have symbolic significance. In most myths, the magical talisman is symbolic of some tenant, knowledge or concept; martial arts mentors also use symbols to teach their students "*the way*." In mythology, Odysseus' bow

and Arthur's sword in the stone represents the qualities required for kingship. When their mentors give the heroes these talismans, they are symbolically giving them the knowledge about "the way" to be good leaders. The suitors cannot string Odysseus bow because they lack the qualities necessary for kingship; they do not know the way. The fact that Odysseus' son, Telemachus can almost string the bow shows that he almost has the qualities of kingship, he is learning the way. Similarly, the knights in Arthurian legend cannot pull the sword from the stone because they lack kingly virtues. Merlin has not taught them the way. Although a martial arts mentor does not give a beginner a magical talisman, such as the sword Excalibur, he or she does teach the philosophy, knowledge, and physical skills needed to progress in the art. One can see examples of martial arts masters giving symbolic knowledge to their students by examining poomse. Many World Taekwondo Federation students learn Taegeuk Il Jang in order to earn their yellow belts. On the surface, Taegeuk Il Jang consists of a set of prearranged movements including one strike, two stances, and three blocking techniques. However, the poomse also has significant symbolic meaning. "Taegeuk Il Jang represents Keon, the yang: positive energy, the beginning of Creation, and Heaven."<sup>17</sup> When a teacher transmits this poomse to students, the students symbolically learn the way of using creative energy to make a beginning. Each of the poomse has a symbolic meaning relating to the natures and relations of the forces that comprise the universe. When a student learns and understands a poomse, that student has received a universal truth, symbolically, through his/her teacher. In this way learning poomse correlates

to receiving a mythical talisman.

Like the heroes of the monomyth, martial artists may receive guidance from their mentors, but they must ultimately face challenges on their own. The mentor's duty in myth consists of preparing the hero mentally and physically, so that they have the autonomy to complete their quests alone. In the following interview between Bill Moyers and Joseph Campbell, Campbell explains the role of the teacher in the monomyth:

Moyers: When I take that journey and go down there and slay those dragons, do I have to go alone?

Campbell: If you have someone who can help you, that's fine, too. But, ultimately, the last deed has to be done by oneself. Psychologically, the dragon is one's own binding of oneself to one's ego. We're captured in our own dragon cage. The problem of the psychiatrist is to disintegrate that dragon, break him up, so that you may expand to a larger field of relationships. The ultimate dragon is within you, it is your ego clamping you down.

That's not always easy to find. But it's nice to have someone who can give you a clue. That's the teacher's job, to help you find your Ariadne thread.

Moyers: Like all heroes, the Buddha doesn't show you the truth itself, he shows you the way to truth.

Campbell: But it's got to be your way, not his. The Buddha can't tell you exactly how to get rid of your particular fears, for example. Different teachers may suggest exercises, but they may not be the ones to work for you. All a teacher can do is suggest. He is like a lighthouse that says, "There are rocks over here, steer clear."

There is a channel, however, out there".<sup>18</sup>

Ultimately the story of the monomyth symbolizes an individual's struggle to overcome his/her own internal demons. The various monsters and dragons that the hero must defeat on their quest represent internal insecurities, fears, or flaws. For this reason, the mentor can show the hero the way to overcome these obstacles, but the hero must defeat them on his/her own. Like the supernatural mentors from myth, true martial arts masters teach their students the way to defeat their own psychological demons. For example, many students succeed in defeating their own fears or insecurities in order to break their first board. The teacher can show students the way to focus and commit to a strike, but the student must overcome his/her fears by breaking the board on his/her own. The teacher shows the way, but the action of the student is required to overcome fear and anxiety. Like supernatural mentors from mythology, martial arts mentors show their pupils a way of behaving that aligns with cosmic and ethical values in order to overcome internal as well as external strife.

### **Crossing the First Threshold**

Once the hero of myth has accepted his/her call, he or she must pass a guardian or trial in order to progress to the next level of his or her journey; martial artists go through a similar experience. "This is the point where the person actually crosses into the field of adventure, leaving the known limits of his or her world and venturing into an unknown and dangerous realm where the rules and limits are not known."<sup>19</sup> In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus crosses the first threshold when he

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participates in the Trojan War and uses his intellect in order to win the conflict. King Arthur leaves his old life behind with the act of pulling the sword from the stone. For martial artists, there is also a point at which their involvement becomes more than a hobby that they participate in a couple of times a week. Figuratively, they also must pass through a veil in order to realize all of the benefits of the martial arts. Usually there is an event or challenge that acts as the threshold guardian for the martial artist. For the mythic hero facing the threshold guardian, "The adventure is always and everywhere a passage beyond the veil of the known into the unknown; the powers that watch at the boundary are dangerous; to deal with them is risky; yet for anyone with competence and courage the danger fades."<sup>20</sup> This quotation applies perfectly to the martial artist undergoing the challenge that allows him/her to pass through the veil that separates martial arts as a hobby from martial arts as a way of life. As stated earlier, some practitioners cross the threshold by entering their first tournament or breaking their first board. Although these activities seem dangerous to outsiders, and real danger is involved, the danger fades as a martial artist gains experience, skill, and confidence. When the student crosses the threshold will depend on his or her individual situation. After all, the hero's journey is a metaphor for the internal quest of the individual. "You leave the world that you're in and go into a depth or into a distance or up to a height. There you come to what was missing in the world you formerly inhabited."<sup>21</sup> Once he or she crosses the threshold, be it tournament or pine board, the martial artist, like the mythic hero, finds him or herself more immersed in his

or her new world (the world and culture of the martial art that had previously been little more than a hobby).

### **Belly of the Whale**

After passing a threshold guardian, in order to make a transition between the old self and the new self, the hero of myth must undergo a symbolic death and rebirth that Campbell labeled the "Belly of the Whale."

The belly of the whale represents the final separation from the hero's known world and self. It is sometimes described as the person's lowest point, but it is actually the point when the person is between or transitioning between worlds and selves. The separation has been made, or is being made, or being fully recognized between the old world and old self and the potential for a new world/self. The experiences that will shape the new world and self will begin shortly, or may be beginning with this experience which is often symbolized by something dark, unknown and frightening. By entering this stage, the person shows their willingness to undergo a metamorphosis, to die to him or herself.<sup>22</sup>

In stories, the belly of the whale refers to a time when heroes must dig extra deep in order to survive and stay the course. Often times, the hero will enter a cave, temple, or other closed in space that represents a tomb/womb; when they emerge from this symbolic tomb, a sort of rebirth occurs. Although the hero may come very close to actual death, the meaning of the story lies in the symbolic death of the old self and the rebirth of the new self. In *The Odyssey*, for example, the hero actually enters Hades and must reemerge before he can continue his quest to return home.

Promotional examinations provide the most obvious

parallel for this phase in the martial arts journey. In a way, each belt rank represents an aspect of the self. A white belt, for example, represents the “beginner” aspect of self. In the martial arts, an individual will enter the dojang or other testing area (a place that participants will treat with heightened respect like a temple) as one belt color and leave with another color. Practitioners symbolically leave one aspect of themselves behind and emerge from the promotional exam with another. During a challenging belt test, students typically pass one or more threshold test. In doing so, they find a new aspect of their identity and they symbolically depart from the world and self that they knew before the examination.

## **Initiation**

### **The Road of Trials**

After passing the first threshold and the belly of the whale, the heroes of myth and martial arts have gone beyond the departure phase of Campbell's monomyth. During the initiation phase, both discover that their tests and trials continue during the initiation phase. Campbell labeled the first step of initiation, “The Road of Trials.” The road of trials consists of a series of tests, tasks, or ordeals that the person must undergo to begin their transformation. Often the person fails one or more of these tests. In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus must find his way past the island of the Cyclops, the island of the witch, Circe, and the island of Calypso. Additionally, he must defeat monsters such as Charybdis, Scylla, and the Sirens. Modern martial artists must also face a road

of challenges in order to progress in their arts. Like mythic heroes, they may not defeat all of these trials on their first attempt. Of importance is the idea that the monsters in myth are metaphors for individual, internal flaws or weaknesses. Cyclops, for example, with his one eye, represents the personality type that sees only one perspective. Like Odysseus, martial arts students must undergo a series of tasks in order to progress on their journeys. Prior to their next exam, students must gain proficiency in required techniques, learn additional poomse, practice self-defense drills, compete in a prescribed number of tournaments, etc... Like the mythic hero, students must face internal issues in order to master each test. For example, students may have to overcome narcissism in order to accept that the poomse that they think they have mastered could improve with repetition and focus. A basic tenant of many martial arts is that the battle, even when facing an opponent, is internal. Mastery of the self is the goal of most martial arts. A Buddhist proverb says, "In order to achieve a certain goal, you must first become a certain kind of person. Once you have become that person, attainment of the goal is no concern of yours."<sup>23</sup> This proverb highlights the importance of mastery of the inner self in order to achieve external goals. In martial arts and myth, the road of trials focuses on internal rather than external challenges.

### **The Meeting with the Goddess**

Many myths include a plot element in which the typically male hero unites with an uncorrupted female figure. In Arthurian romance, the knight rescues a damsel in distress. Homer's Odysseus struggles to



reunite with his beloved wife, Penelope. According to Campbell, this portion of a story represents

the ultimate adventure, when all the barriers and ogres have been overcome, commonly represented as a mystical marriage . . . of the triumphant hero-soul with the Queen Goddess of the World. This is the crisis at the nadir, the zenith, or at the uttermost edge of the earth, at the central point of the cosmos, in the tabernacle of the temple, or within the darkness of the deepest chamber of the heart.<sup>24</sup>

Although this common plot device may heighten the intrigue of a story through the theme of romantic love, it also has symbolic importance. Once again, the struggles that heroes undergo in myth have important symbolic significance. This phase of a myth

is also known as the "hieros gamos", or sacred marriage, the union of opposites, and may take place entirely within the person. In other words, the person begins to see him or herself in a non-dualistic way. This is a very important step in the process and is often represented by the person finding the other person that he or she loves most completely. Although Campbell symbolizes this step as a meeting with a goddess, unconditional love and /or self unification does not have to be represented by a woman.<sup>25</sup>

Eastern philosophy and many martial artists would recognize the "union of opposites" as the forces of Um and Yang. On the surface level, martial artists apply the concepts of Um and Yang through the study of "soft" and "hard" martial techniques. Soft style martial techniques seem to yield to an opposing force in order to overcome it while hard techniques may meet force

with force. Accomplished martial artists learn to use both strategies, Um and Yang. On a more philosophical level,

They (Um and Yang) are the forces of light and darkness, of left and right, of ebb and flow, positive and negative, male and female, matter and anti-matter, warp and woof, good and evil...The Um is a passive, receptive force, and the Yang is an active, assertive force. Both are necessary in the Universe and in our lives.<sup>26</sup>

Ultimately, the meeting with the goddess for martial artists represents the attainment of balance within the self and with the universe.

### **Woman as Temptress**

In contrast to the goddess of the previous step in Campbell's initiation, many stories include female characters that tempt the heroes to abandon their quests in favor of more earthly pursuits. For example, The Odyssey included characters such as Circe and Calypso. Each of these female characters attempted to convince Odysseus to abandon his quest for Ithaca in order to remain on their respective isles. Symbolically, this stage of the myth represents internal struggles.

At one level, this step is about those temptations that may lead the hero to abandon or stray from his or her quest, which as with the Meeting with the Goddess does not necessarily have to be represented by a woman. For Campbell, however, this step is about the revulsion that the usually male hero may feel about his own fleshy/earthly nature, and the subsequent attachment or projection of that revulsion to women. Woman is a metaphor for the physical or material temptations of life,

since the hero-knight was often tempted by  
lust from his spiritual journey.<sup>27</sup>

Like the great mythic heroes, martial artists must overcome physical temptations to continue advancing towards their goals. Especially at advanced levels, martial art training becomes difficult. Students must make a conscious decision to focus on their goals. At times, the mere act of attending class rather than succumbing to the temptation of sitting on the sofa and watching television can require discipline. After all, every moment spent training in the martial arts is a moment that could be spent doing something much easier. As the training becomes more difficult and the progress comes more slowly, the temptation to quit can increase. Without self-discipline, a sore body can easily succumb to the temptation to engage in activities that may not be as healthy but have more instant gratification. In regards to overcoming these kinds of temptations in the advanced levels of martial arts, Master Richard Chun offers the following advice:

You will have to redouble your concentration and your disciplined practice until you are totally absorbed in the act and you become part of the unified spirit, which overcomes disorder...The path on which you have embarked is an arduous one that will make great demands on your body and your spirit, but you can be encouraged by the realization that others have gone this way before you and that they can help you on the journey.

If the task seems difficult, remember—once you have started it, it is not so hard. Most people are born with natural ability and strength, and life is not easy for any of us. However, if you keep applying yourself with diligence and determination, you will

find yourself getting closer and closer to your goal. All worthwhile things are as difficult as they are rare.<sup>28</sup>

After examining the close link between the martial arts journey and the monomyth thus far, it should not surprise anyone that Master Chun's advice for advanced martial artists to progress sums up the moral of every hero myth.

### **Atonement with the Father**

After making the decision to follow the quest in spite of various earthly temptations, the next step of Campbell's monomyth (atonement with the father) involves the hero gaining approval from or defeating an older, very powerful, and typically male figure. For example, in Homer's epic poem, Odysseus must make amends with the god Poseidon in order to return to Ithaca. On one level, this element of mythology reflects the inevitable process of the younger generation taking the place of the older, the son taking the place of the father. However, as with the other steps in the monomyth, this step also holds symbolic meaning in regards to the internal quest of personal development.

In this step the person must confront and be initiated by whatever holds the ultimate power in his or her life. In many myths and stories this is the father, or a father figure who has life and death power. This is the center point of the journey. All the previous steps have been moving in to this place, all that follow will move out from it. Although this step is most frequently symbolized by an encounter with a male entity, it does not have to be a male; just someone or thing with incredible power.<sup>29</sup>

For martial artists, the father-like figure that they must gain approval from commonly takes the form of an instructor, or even an instructor's master. Commonly, the martial artist will go before this person in order to prove him or herself worthy during a promotional examination, especially for an advanced level. Campbell broke the word atonement into three parts, at-one-ment. In order to promote to an advanced level, the martial artist must prove that he or she is "at one" with the teachings of the master. This is the martial artist equivalent of atonement with the father in Campbell's monomyth.

In order to find this atonement, the hero of the monomyth also had some internal challenges. According to Campbell,

Atonement (at-one-ment) consists in no more than the abandonment of that self-generated double monster - the dragon thought to be God (superego) and the dragon thought to be Sin (repressed id). But this requires an abandonment of the attachment to ego itself, and that is what is difficult.<sup>30</sup>

Like the mythic hero, the martial artist must also let go of his or her ego in order to reach a goal. Taekwondo Grandmaster Soon Man Lee described the importance of this step as follows:

This process is achieved by first forming a Taekwondo spirit. With this spirit you find the means to a stable life based upon the harmony between yourself and nature by getting rid of the ego (the discriminating mind) and reaching the Mu Yeh (the artistic ideal of the immersion of the soul into the body to achieve perfect action).<sup>31</sup>

Thus Taekwondo and other martial arts often require students to win approval from a father figure and let go of their egos. The step in martial arts bears a strong resemblance to the step in Campbell's monomyth.

### **Apotheosis**

After successfully atoning with the father (and letting go of the ego), the mythic hero reaches a state of inner peace in which he or she seems beyond the troubles of the world.

After trials such as resisting Woman as Temptress and the reconciliation of Atonement with the Father, the hero transcends, achieving a higher place. This is a point of realization in which a greater understanding is achieved. Armed with this new knowledge and perception, the hero is resolved and ready for the more difficult part of the adventure. This transition may be symbolized with the change in appearance of the hero.<sup>32</sup>

In *The Odyssey*, this stage of the monomyth occurs when Odysseus returns to Ithaca. He finds that his home has been overrun by suitors attempting to take his possessions and his wife. Athena changes his appearance to disguise him as an old man; through his many trials he has learned to control his emotions, utilize his intellect, and time his actions. All of the suitors together cannot contend with Odysseus in this god-like state.

Martial artists can also experience a sort of apotheosis. Their symbolic change in appearance often takes the form of black trim on their uniforms accompanied by a black belt, but the change goes beyond the physical. Campbell recognized a connection

between an inner-nirvana and physical performance in an interview with Bill Moyers. The following excerpt from this interview illuminates his thoughts on the matter:

Moyers: In all of these journeys of mythology, there's a place everyone wishes to find. The Buddhists talk of Nirvana and Jesus talks of peace, of the mansion with many rooms. Is that typical of the hero's journey - that there's a place to find?

Campbell: The place to find is within yourself. I learned a little about this in athletics. The athlete who is in top form has a quiet place within himself, and it's around this, somehow, that his action occurs. . . . There's a center of quietness within, which has to be known and held. If you lose that center, you are in tension and begin to fall apart.<sup>33</sup>

Martial artists can recognize this state within themselves while sparring. They rise above the fear and nervousness that often accompanies dangerous situations, and they have practiced their art to the point that they can execute martial techniques without conscious thought. They have complete focus, and they seem to react without conscious thought to each attack. Zen martial artists refer to this mental state as *mushin* no shin or "no mindedness." The ability to reach this state signifies an advanced level of training, that parallels the apotheosis of mythic heroes.

### **The Ultimate Boon**

After learning the required lessons and proving themselves worthy, the ultimate boon signifies the point in the monomyth in which the hero achieves his

or her goal. In *The Odyssey*, the hero returns to Ithaca and regains his home. For the martial artist the ultimate boon may be the black belt, the trophy from the important tournament, or whatever goal the artist has set for him or herself. In all cases, the ultimate boon symbolizes the internal growth of the individual.

## The Return

### Refusal of the Return

After obtaining the ultimate boon, the hero must begin the most difficult portion of their journey. During the last portion of Campbell's monomyth, the hero must take all of the lessons, glory, etc... that has come from their internal quest and somehow return to the every-day life that they left behind. During the return, heroes must ask themselves, "why, when all has been achieved, the ambrosia has been drunk, and we have conversed with the gods, why come back to normal life with all its cares and woes?"<sup>34</sup> Odysseus kept his guise as an old man for a time before returning to his rightful role as the King of Ithaca. The real difficulty with the return of the hero lies in somehow making the person that he or she has become jive with the world that he or she has left behind. The returning hero has a responsibility to use his or her new-found wisdom in order to benefit mankind, but he or she may not know how to accomplish this. In *The Odyssey*, for example, the hero has a responsibility to use his abilities to set things right and defeat the suitors that are usurping the resources of his land. However,

the responsibility has been frequently



refused. Even the Buddha, after his triumph, doubted whether the message of realization could be communicated, and saints are reported to have passed away while in the supernal ecstasy.<sup>35</sup>

Many martial artists experience this type of feeling after receiving their first black belt, and many quit their martial arts training because they cannot make "the return." After working so intensely to obtain their First Dan, the martial artist often doesn't know what to do once they reach their goal.

At this point, more than 50% of all Black Belts and Black Belt candidates leave the Martial Arts without truly understanding why. Without the mental discipline and humility that is an integral part of all Martial Arts we are ill equipped to get past this obstacle.<sup>36</sup>

Since starting the martial arts, students think of the black belt as representing mastery. If they have obtained mastery in the form of the belt, why continue training. Rather than allowing them to rest on their laurels, an instructor often tells the new black belt something similar to Grandmaster Chun's message to new black belts:

You will find that the study of Taekwondo is a continuing process in which the master is forever a student. This is a humbling realization, but it is true that only through humility can you hope to achieve understanding...You will find that you have to unlearn much of what you thought you had learned and to relearn it in a totally new way.

There is a reason for this. Until you reached your current level of mental and physical ability, you could not have begun

to master the tiny nuances in each and every one of the movements of the art. You were simply not prepared to do so. Your attainment of this level brings you to a new beginning at a higher plateau. This is the meaning of First Dan.<sup>37</sup>

Many new First Dan black belts would rather leave their martial arts training as an “expert” rather than continue with more difficult training as an advanced beginner. However, quitting the journey at this point returns nothing to society and is therefore not heroic.

### **Rescue From Without**

The next step of the monomyth that can apply to the martial artist is the step that Campbell labeled “Rescue from Without.” Just as they sometimes need outside aid in order to begin their quest, martial artists and mythic heroes sometimes need an outside nudge in order to return to their every-day world. In Homer’s poem, Odysseus is unable to return to Ithaca; the Phaeacians out of concern for his health, give him a sleeping draught and return him to his home. Athena awakens him, and he learns of Ithaca’s need for his return. Martial artists also sometimes need an external nudge in order to make the return journey. Often, masters will motivate students by telling them the true meaning of their First Dan. Teaching less advanced students can also provide an external motivation by showing new black belts the need for their expertise that other students may lack.

### **The Crossing of the Return Threshold**

In order to return to their every-day lives from the mythic world of the quest, heroes must often cross a

return threshold.

The trick in returning is to retain the wisdom gained on the quest, to integrate that wisdom into a human life, and then maybe figure out how to share the wisdom with the rest of the world. This is usually extremely difficult.<sup>38</sup>

In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus uses his new skills and insight to trick and kill the suitors who are attempting to steal his wife and his land. He also begins teaching Telemachus, his son, how to use his intellect in order to overcome adversity. In effect, Odysseus benefits society by passing his knowledge on to his son, the future leader of Ithaca and ridding the land of the wasteful suitors who abuse it.

Martial artists cross the “Return Threshold” when they continue their training and strive to use their experience to better society. Many advanced martial artists improve society by starting their own martial arts school in order to help others begin an internal quest of self-improvement. Others carry the ideals that they have learned through martial arts, such as self-control, courtesy, integrity, perseverance, and indomitable spirit into other areas of their every-day lives in order to improve society. For martial artists, the key to crossing the threshold is to continue training and use their insight to improve the world around them.

### **Master of Two Worlds**

In order to reach this advance state of the hero's quest, the hero develops the ability to live simultaneously in the spiritual world of the quest and the earthly world of every-day life. As Campbell says,

Freedom to pass back and forth across the world division, from the perspective of the apparitions of time to that of the causal deep and back - not contaminating the principles of the one with those of the other, yet permitting the mind to know the one by virtue of the other - is the talent of the master.<sup>39</sup>

Odysseus uses the lessons that he learned on his quest in order to achieve victory in the every-day world of Ithaca. A martial arts master will apply the do concept of their martial art to their everyday lives. These masters will exhibit self-control, courtesy, integrity, perseverance, and indomitable spirit whether they are in the dojang or not. Any who question the ability of martial concepts to transfer to the every-day world need only look to the success of companies that use the martial musings of Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* in order to outperform the competition.

### **Freedom to Live**

The last stage of the hero's journey is analogous to, but more complex than the happy endings found in fairy tales. "Mastery leads to freedom from the fear of death, which in turn is the freedom to live. This is sometimes referred to as living in the moment, neither anticipating the future nor regretting the past."<sup>40</sup> For Odysseus, this stage occurs after he wins his kingdom back and reunites with his family. In terms of the martial arts, the mindset of the samurai warrior demonstrates this advanced stage. "The philosophy of Bushido is 'freedom from fear.' It meant that the Samurai transcended his fear of death."<sup>41</sup> Through disciplined practice and Zen meditation it was said that the Samurai warrior learned to live in the moment and

conquer the fear of death. The following quotation demonstrates this martial principle:

One finds life through conquering the fear of death within one's mind. Empty the mind of all forms of attachment, make a go-for-broke charge and conquer the opponent with one decisive slash.<sup>42</sup>

The adoption of this state allowed the samurai the freedom to live in peace even in the midst of violence.

## **Conclusion**

As previously stated, traditional martial arts provide students with a meaningful rite of passage experience as well as tools to experience an archetypal transformation. While individuals may experience similar steps in other activities, traditional martial arts uniquely include character development as a primary goal. Furthermore, this purpose of martial arts makes it more than a hobby for many practitioners. These traditional arts have special importance in our industrial society in which many passively watch the deeds of others rather than partaking in great deeds themselves. As Campbell stated,

I think this is something (watching others perform great deeds while consoling ourselves to impotence) that has overtaken us only recently in this culture...when you think about what people are actually undergoing in our civilization, you realize it's a very grim thing to be a modern human being. The drudgery of the lives of most of the people who have to support families—well, it's a life-extinguishing affair.<sup>43</sup>

Through the steps of the monomyth, traditional arts offer more than exercise; they also foster internal growth. After all, "Our life evokes our character. You find out more about yourself as you go on. That's why it's good to be able to put yourself in situations that will evoke your higher nature rather than your lower."<sup>44</sup> The key to the success of martial arts as a character development tool lies in the fact that they do evoke the higher nature of the individual. This is precisely the purposed of the heroic quest.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Lamotte. 2. The Vision Quest
- <sup>2</sup> Youngman.
- <sup>3</sup> Armstrong.
- <sup>4</sup> Neil.
- <sup>5</sup> Markstrom, et alia, p. 33.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibidem.
- <sup>7</sup> Dyck, p. 25.
- <sup>8</sup> Waldron.
- <sup>9</sup> Campbell, Power, p. 152.
- <sup>10</sup> Campbell, Hero, p. 121.
- <sup>11</sup> Office of Resources for International and Area Studies.
- <sup>12</sup> Warren.
- <sup>13</sup> Campbell, Hero, p. 58.
- <sup>14</sup> Warren.
- <sup>15</sup> Campbell, Hero, p. 59.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibidem, pp. 69-70.
- <sup>17</sup> Whang, et alia, p. 190.
- <sup>18</sup> Kensington Communications.

- <sup>19</sup> Warren.
- <sup>20</sup> Campbell, Hero, p. 82.
- <sup>21</sup> Campbell, Power, p. 157.
- <sup>22</sup> Warren.
- <sup>23</sup> The proverb was often cited by Master Bill House at promotional examinations through Cody Martial Arts Academy
- <sup>24</sup> Campbell, Hero, p. 109.
- <sup>25</sup> Warren.
- <sup>26</sup> Chun, p. 28.
- <sup>27</sup> Warren.
- <sup>28</sup> Chun, p. 24.
- <sup>29</sup> Warren.
- <sup>30</sup> Campbell, Hero, p. 13.
- <sup>31</sup> Lee and Gaetane, p. 15.
- <sup>32</sup> Straker.
- <sup>33</sup> Campbell, Power, p. 160.
- <sup>34</sup> Warren.
- <sup>35</sup> Campbell, Hero, p. 192.
- <sup>36</sup> Simonds.
- <sup>37</sup> Chun, p. 22.
- <sup>38</sup> Warren.
- <sup>39</sup> Campbell, Hero, p. 229.
- <sup>40</sup> Warren.
- <sup>41</sup> Scribd. Glossary of Samurai & Related Words.
- <sup>42</sup> Togo Shigekata.
- <sup>43</sup> Campbell, Power, p. 160.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibidem, p. 159.