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The Phenomenology of Pain in the Philosophy of Martial Arts Practice

While the experience of pain is one of the most common of all experiences in martial arts practice, it is also one of its most taboo subjects. This is not to suggest that pain isn't talked about (as I will show, it's talked about all the time), but rather that when it is discussed it's almost always described as something non-integral to the training process. It's tacitly understood as something incidental to practice, an inevitable "evil" that is to be avoided at all costs. While this paper will not argue that pain is a *good thing*, it will present a case for how pain is, in fact, *integral* to training. Moreover, this paper will attempt—through a brief overview of philosophical and psychological studies of pain—to describe the function of pain within the martial arts and what direct effect it has on training and on the development of martial artists more broadly.

Such a study of the integral function of pain within the martial arts would have particular resonance with those of us who consider ourselves to be life-long martial artists, those for whom martial arts practice is a key part of our sense of ourselves. This is not a scientific study, but rather a phenomenological approach based on a few key Western philosophers who address the issue of pain in human consciousness. My hope is that by having a greater sensitivity to our pain and the pain of others, we will also come to a more comprehensive understanding of the martial arts, of how it is taught, and of how it is learned.

Part 1. The Hegelian Paradigm

In Georg Friedrich Hegel's dialectical model of consciousness, he lays out the terms of what he calls the "master-slave dialectic." According to the terms of this dialectic, a person comes to understanding and consciousness via a constant, hierarchical (non-equal) projecting of him/herself into another's place. To imagine oneself in the position of the slave—and conversely to imagine oneself in the position of the master—is to know what it means to be both a subject and one who subjects. For Hegel, then, consciousness can only come about through a constant process of understanding oneself as both the source and recipient of power.

Following from this dialectical model, consciousness is tied to not only the exchange of power in the abstract sense, but also in a more practical, material sense. Inflicting pain (as punishment) and receiving pain (again, as punishment) constitute an essential part of Hegel's dialectic of consciousness. True understanding can only come about in the exchange of pain—both as its recipient and as its source.

If we were to extend Hegel's dialectic to martial arts training, we see what looks like a decidedly "old-fashioned" training style. A student-teacher relationship following from Hegel's model would depend on a teacher demonstrating to a student a particular technique by performing it on her or him. For example, a teacher might kick a student in order to "teach" them the technique. The "learning" process comes from the distinctly hierarchical relationship between the teacher and the student. Imparting pain (by the teacher) and experiencing pain (by the student) would constitute the full dialectic of the learning process. While the teacher kicks the student as a "lesson," the teacher also does so with full sympathy of the student's own experience of being kicked (of being "taught"). The teacher may him or herself be currently another's student, or may have been taught by a teacher in a similar manner at some point in the past. Regardless, that kick was done not as some sadistic act, but as part of a dialectical cycle borne of the inherently hierarchical power relationship between teacher and student. This single painful "lesson" is taught not as a simple act between *that one* teacher and *that one* student, but as an extension of all past lessons that have been taught between all students and teachers. Similarly, the student receives this "lesson" with an eye either to current or future students of her or his own. That single experience of pain that is being "taught" has its own life both in the past and in the future.

This all sounds rather simplistic and sadistic and unpleasant (as it should). Few modern martial arts practitioners (whether students or teachers) would ever articulate "teaching" in so harsh of terms; however, there is nevertheless a persistent presence of precisely this sort of relationship that exists in most modern martial arts styles. While no longer a *central* structure in martial arts, it still can be found in many training methods and schools. For example, it is not uncommon for instructors to teach students a technique by performing the technique on them, or even more commonly to perform a technique on a student so that other students can witness the technique and "learn" from it.

It is a central truth of the martial arts that it can only be learned through precisely this kind of demonstration. Since the teacher is presumably the one who "knows" a technique, he or she must then be the one to perform it. However, what is not true is that in most modern styles, a teacher is prohibited (whether by custom or by law) from imparting actual pain on a student. On the surface, this distinguishes modern martial arts training from this older style. Pain, in these situations, must be avoided at all costs. However, this does not mean that it is absent. If we continue adhering to the Hegelian model, we see that pain has instead been sublimated. It is there, but it must be instead imagined, or even better, *approximated*.

The final element of Hegel's master-slave dialectic is the concept of "Aufhebung" or sublation. The idea is that out of this interaction between master and slave, some greater understanding emerges. In the full version of the myth of the encounter between the master and the slave, Hegel points out that their meeting cannot end with one of the two dying by the hand of the other. If that were

the case, then no greater understanding can emerge. Instead, some agreement (whether explicit or implicit) must be arrived at. Consequently, the experience of pain is neither final nor necessary. The merest implication of pain is enough to bring about the hierarchical understanding between these two figures.

It is this last quality that is most frequently used in modern martial arts training. The lesson comes not from imparting pain, but from *abstracting* it. A teacher demonstrates to his or her students a technique that *would* cause pain *if it were* to be used against them. It is that hypothetical structure that is most directly responsible for the depth of the understanding between them. This is not, however, to be confused with a "threat." Instead, pain has been abstracted from the demonstration and made over into a purely hypothetical experience whose reality is never implied or even suggested. While the apparent subject of such a lesson is the technique itself, the unspoken thrust of the lesson is the abstracted pain that *would be* its result. It is here where we see something closely resembling Hegel's notion of Aufhebung: pain and understanding are both "lifted out" from the demonstration and held up as abstractions greater than the sum of the objects/movements physically on display. To understand the technique is to imagine the pain it might cause.

While Hegel's model has its limitations for understanding the role of pain in martial arts practice, it is this last connection—between pain and understanding—that proves most salient. Neither is seen, felt, or made materially manifest, but nevertheless they both exist as a "sublated" and essential component of training in practice. And, I would argue, more than being merely essential, imagined pain and understanding form the unacknowledged cornerstone of all good martial arts training.

Part 2. The Freudian Paradigm

Pain proved a particularly tricky subject for Sigmund Freud. Most of his life's work in psychoanalysis was devoted to understanding the nature of pleasure. Even in his descriptions of neuroses, all seemingly unpleasurable behaviors and thoughts were really just detours to eventual pleasure. Regardless, his later works turn with greater and greater frequency and interest to the problems posed by the experience of pain. Earlier in his career, Freud worked with existing models for explaining the psychology of the pain experience—namely, sadism and masochism. Sadism is, at its simplest, experiencing pain as pleasure by inflicting it on another. Masochism, again put simply, is taking pain upon oneself as a form of pleasure.

But more complexly, sadism and masochism form for Freud a pair of complementary neuroses (which he termed "perversions"). For Freud, the sadist is an interrupted masochist, and the masochist is an introverted sadist. Masochism, however, proved slippery for Freud since his psychoanalytic model couldn't account for the willed experience of pain. Instead, the best he could do was to say that the masochist externalizes the punishment he/she receives by identifying

with the superego (the seemingly external agent or conscience inflicting the pain). Regardless of this initial explanation, he would return many times to the "economic problem of masochism" and look for more robust explanations with each revisiting.

In his later years, Freud would go so far as to leave behind his earlier ego-superego-id model of human psychology and move into something more closely resembling Hegel's dialectic. Freud eventually laid out a model wherein two competing "drives" are at work; Eros, the life drive, and Thanatos, the death drive. Freud left much of this later work underdeveloped, but the resemblance to Hegel's master-slave dialectic is striking, particularly with respect to the implications for the experience of pain. Where in Freud's earlier model pain had no place but was simply an illusion or a fiction that was a stopping place on the way to pleasure, in Freud's later model pain has a place of its own standing in a direct dialectical relation to pleasure. That shift is dramatic considering how elaborately his earlier schemas for human cognition and behavior had depended on utterly factoring out the pain experience. Rather than serving as a preliminary stage to pleasure, pain instead stood as its dialectical opposite.

However, the terminology and psychology of Freud's earlier formulation has had a strong staying power in both 20^{th} century philosophy and in the popular consciousness. Therefore, I will start with the earlier sadomasochistic economy in my discussion of how Freud's model plays out in martial arts training, but I will conclude with a modified note that attempts to take account of how his later model might ratify or change this preliminary reading.

The concept of "pleasure" is an odd one in martial arts practice. Precisely where and when satisfaction, gratification, and feeling good factor into training isn't always clear. For the most part, pleasure is equally as abstracted from training as pain. Abstract concepts like "personal achievement," "intellectual growth," and "respect" aren't simple to explain on their own, let alone with respect to the psychoanalytic category of pleasure. However, what we can see from applying a Freudian paradigm for the interaction of pain and pleasure is a carefully managed language and behavior designed to limit and constrain when, where, and how one feels both pain and pleasure. At the most fundamental level, both concepts are abstracted to such a large degree that neither is fully recognizable in martial arts training.

Pleasure is most often understood at its most grandiose; that is, it isn't an instant or immediate experience. While much of what is happening in training is physical in nature, pleasure is not. Conversely, pain is understood at its most acute; it is short-lived, immediate, and nearly always physical in nature. It, too, is abstracted, but even in its abstraction (as an imagined experience), it is intensely localized. For example, the pleasure one gets in improving a technique rarely happens instantaneously and is often attached to larger discursive subjects like "self-awareness." Pain, on the other hand, even when it's at its most abstracted, might consist of the imagined pain of a strike to the solar plexus. Even though that pain doesn't necessarily take place in training (i.e., it is abstracted), it's

understood as both physical and localized.

Less clear is the interaction of these two experiences. If, according to Freud, pain is a long detour to pleasure, then the positive function of those individual experiences of pain (real or imagined) comes into focus. The jock refrain "no pain no gain" has in the martial arts a slightly different tenor. Less pertaining directly to ascetic bodily abjection, the pleasure taken from pain is similar to that found within the Hegelian model. *Understanding* is the ultimate pleasurable gain, and since that understanding is tied to a bodily knowledge, the physicality of pain becomes transformed into a "pleasurable" lesson. Again, as with the Hegelian model, that pain is often not literally experienced, but is merely imagined. Similar to Freud's "moral masochism," the pain of training has much more to do with projecting oneself into the position of the subject experiencing pain rather than actually experiencing it oneself.

However, this leaves pain again in an awkward place. As Freud's earlier work claimed, this formulation implies that pain is not an experience of its own, but is merely part of some further implied pleasure (here, as in the Hegelian paradigm, pain is transformed into a potentially pleasurable "lesson"). Instead of something to be avoided, it makes pain into a necessary component of the exchange of knowledge. It is here that Freud's later model of the "drives" (Eros and Thanatos) provides an alternative approach. Instead of pain being merely transformed into eventual pleasure, this later model sees in pain a perpetual counterpoint to pleasure. A thinking subject is thus caught between two constant poles at all times, toward a self-destructive end and a life-affirming end. If we alter our earlier reading of martial arts practice in light of this substantial change in Freud's thinking, pain is not responsible for pleasure. Rather, the life drive is responsible for deriving pleasure from pain. As the binding principle, Eros looks to the ineffability of pain and attempts to make sense of it. Meanwhile, the perpetual presence and imagined possibility of pain works in the opposite direction. By keeping both in an abstracted relationship to one another, training then becomes an exercise in negotiating and balancing these two drives.

Seen in this light, the whole point of training is learning how to make sense of the constant possibility of both of these ends. Training, then, would be the neutral ground wherein the martial arts practitioner tests her or his mettle. Gleaning from pain (whether real or imagined) something pleasurable—like knowledge—takes work and is not, according to the terms of this later Freudian model, inherent to the practice itself. Nothing is "taught" but is rather "demonstrated." The lesson, then, comes from how the practitioner navigates Eros and Thanatos in the wake of the demonstration. At the center of the two drives lies the practitioner's own body and mind, and it is this last concept that gets taken up by many post-Freudian philosophers and thinkers in the latter half of the twentieth century.

In her revision of both Freud's and Hegel's respective understandings of the relationship between pain and consciousness, Elaine Scarry presents a much more variegated dialectic. For her, the relationship between the experience of pain

and its imagining leaves always the possibility for agency (whether constructive or destructive) to step in to bridge the cap between them. Unlike Hegel's dialectic for human consciousness wherein understanding is "lifted out" from the interaction between master and slave, Scarry recognizes the simultaneous possibility that just as understanding can emerge from that relationship, so too can stupidity (a term she uses in a political sense, not in a measurable or individual sense). And unlike Freud who sees in the relation between pain and pleasure a constant economic exchange between the two, Scarry sees "power" as something that is forcibly brought into the picture by pain's inherently analogical nature; thus, "pleasure" isn't inherent to the psychology of the experience, but is rather brought in by an outside force and violently extracted from the experience of pain.

Scarry's revision of Hegel's dialectic has many possible applications to understanding martial arts training. First and foremost, it is the shift from thinking about pain itself as the subject of exchange to thinking rather about its expression as the subject of exchange. How we as martial artists imagine pain, sympathize with pain, listen to others' expression of pain, and express our own is vital to the everyday functioning of useful and productive training. For her, it is the expression and imagining of pain that is the heart of human creativity (and simultaneously of its most destructive tendencies). As a crucial aspect of training in practice, martial artists always attempt to approach asymptotically the experience of pain—whether another's or our own. The closer we can approximate it, the more fully we can imagine and express it. It is in the mutual and shared practice of working to come to a constant consensus about where and how pain occurs that leads to a common and shared ability to give a voice to (imagined) pain. By doing so, we bring to the training pain's creative aspect rather than its destructive one. A destructive application would likely involve a non-shared expression of pain, in which one practitioner extracts and dictates the expression of pain on another (for example, by deliberately hurting another person in order to draw from them an involuntary expression). It is in the communal, shared effort to understand, voice, and imagine pain that we align ourselves with its creative aspect.

Part 3. Elements of Pain in Training

The final part of this paper will be a brief overview of a handful of training elements and the role pain (and its imagining) plays in each. As before, the point here is not at all to encourage harm, but rather to encourage a fuller understanding of its role and of how and why imagining pain is so important in training.

Perhaps the most obvious place to start is simple instruction since I've already alluded to it multiple times in this paper. As much as instruction is built around demonstrating and explaining how to perform a technique or set of related techniques, those techniques are themselves built around the production of pain. Importantly, as I've argued above, that pain is more often than not *imagined*

pain, but it's presence is there regardless. What is seen and felt in instruction isn't the pain itself, but the technique that might cause it. The pain that would result must then be hypothetically projected onto some imaginary person or some imaginary culmination of a completed technique. Another way of saying this is that the techniques taught in class are not "complete"; rather, they are asymptotic approximations of a complete technique. The application and culmination of that technique must be imagined, with its end marked by the imagining of some painful end (of its intended target).

Not only do the techniques themselves approximate this experience, but that projection of the painful endpoint of a technique is also present in a number of other aspects of instruction, as well. Regular soreness, physical exertion, endurance and strength exercises, and so on all lead to greater and greater amounts of discomfort and push as close to pain as possible without actually causing what might be thought of as real pain. Instead, a good work out is a controlled and managed discomfort meant to avoid anything truly harmful. But the simultaneous approximation of pain combined with the controlled escalation of discomfort shows that an important part of training is the cultivation of pain management. That is, the harder one exerts oneself without causing oneself harm, the more one can convert what may have been pain into mere discomfort. Actual pain becomes more clearly defined and separated (as much as possible) from practice. It is made over into an ideational construct that serves a dialectical purpose, even though it has no manifest presence in the practice itself.

This can be seen clearly in sparring and competition, and in the discourse surrounding those two aspects of training. The common truism that a practitioner is "fighting themselves" rather than another person finds in phenomenological dialectics a clear explanation for how this works both in practice and in the development of a martial arts consciousness or understanding. Because so much training (if not *all training*) cultivates an imagined pain and object of pain, translating that practice into the ring carries with it that same structure. A person's opponent is merely an ephemeral embodiment of that ideational construct. It is for this reason, I would argue, that many martial artists take issue with competition. While the dialectical relationship is the same, the locus of pain is literally embodied in another martial artist rather than made over into an abstract and imagined construct. In addition, the creation and administration of rules and regulations in competition sparring gives a greater material presence and validity to that pain. Even though those rules are ostensibly designed to diminish its effect, they give name and definition (i.e. "reality) to that pain, which runs counter to most martial arts practice. Competition sparring introduces a level of contradiction by giving pain both a literal and a figurative place within the martial arts.

The persistent possibility and reality of physical injury also introduces a layer of complexity and contradiction. However, more often than not, that pain isn't described as having been caused by another person, but rather as something sustained through practice. Thus, a practitioner is more likely to say, "I injured

my knee" rather than "So-and-so injured my knee." This turning inward of the cause of pain is a compensation for what would otherwise be a contradiction in the dialectic between pain and its expression. It seems to have emanated from within the person (as though internally generated) rather than coming at them from the outside world. Pain remains, then, an imagined presence rather than a material and objective presence. In addition, injury is frequently incorporated into the injured person's training. It becomes more deeply internalized as a *part* of their training and of the body's and mind's own capabilities. It isn't a thing outside of the person, but is brought more deeply into him or herself (so as to be overcome and "sublimated" in the Hegelian sense).

In one of the more interesting articulations of the boundary between real and imagined pain, learning one's own or another's pain threshold is crucial to developing one's skills as a martial artist. Learning how far is too far is one of the single-most important concepts in all of martial arts. A good example of this idea in play is the "tap out." Tapping out is something that signals to another person a point *just before* pain. It is a warning sign that indicates where pain lies. It is similar to an ellipsis or a stop sign that demarcates where pain can be found without actually having to experience it. Both the person tapping out and the person obeying the tenets of the tap out learn to recognize and express where pain *would be* if a technique were completed. Finding and outlining an individual's threshold changes from day to day, from technique to technique, from person to person, and so on. It is an enormously complex process, and learning how to outline that boundary and, more importantly, how to articulate and respect it is as long a process as anything else in the martial arts.

Conclusion.

By no means has this preliminary study been exhaustive, and at best could be understood as a brief outline to a much more comprehensive work. However, I hope it begins to suggest how we might learn to understand and respond to the role of pain in martial arts practice. Since this is not a scientific study, these notes are meant instead to help generate a heightened sensitivity to the role pain might play in learning, teaching, and understanding the martial arts. While I draw on only a few key philosophical models in this work, I hope it gives at the very least a sense for what it means to incorporate a phenomenology of pain into our broader awareness of training. Both real and imagined, pain is everywhere at work to teach us to be more conscious, more conscientious, and ever more diligent in our everyday martial arts practice.

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