The "Ki" to a Lasting Marriage

The Application of Internal Martial Arts Principles in the Marital Dojo

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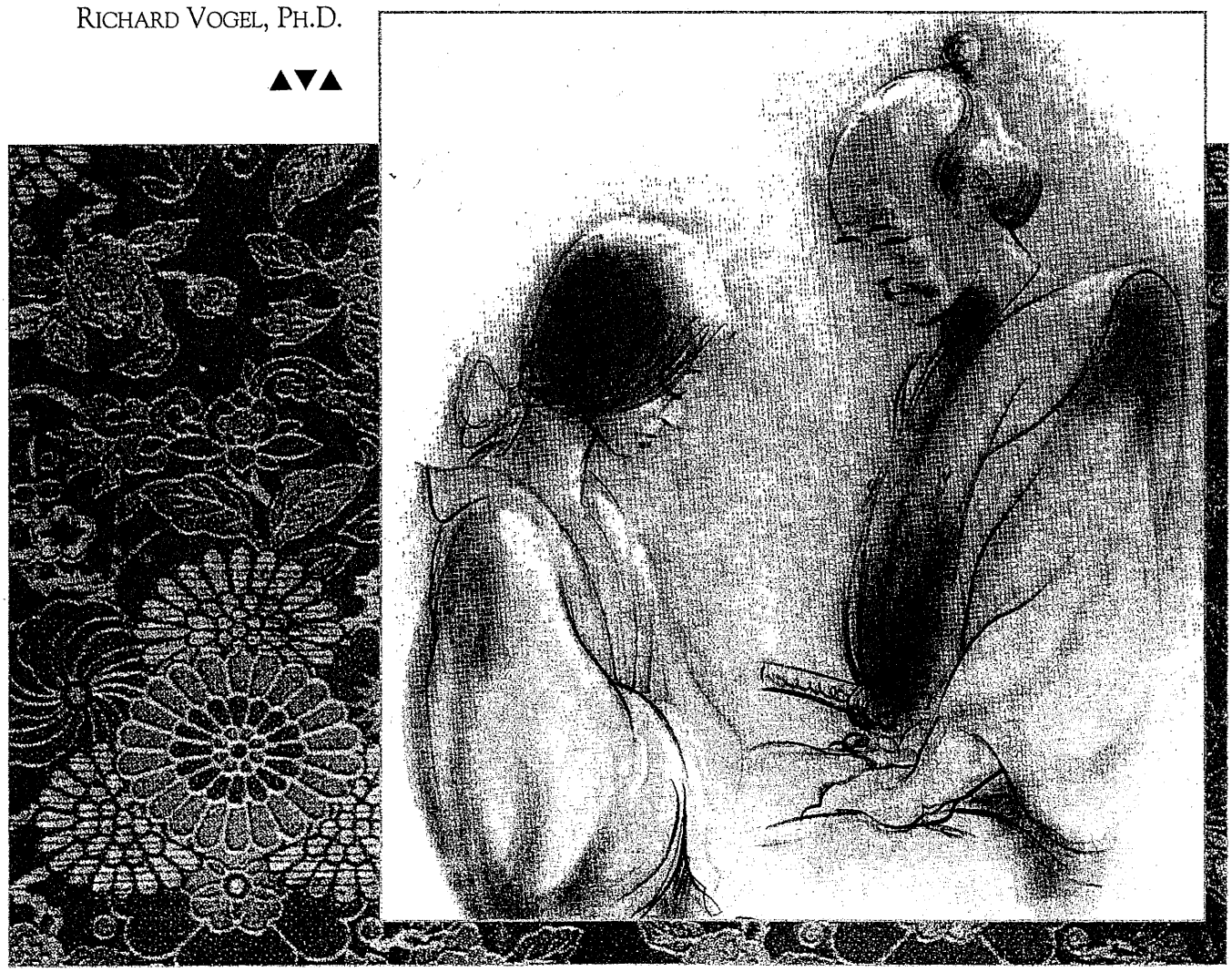

Marriage is hard work, as proven by the fact that the divorce rate in America is approaching 50 percent. According to retired Princeton University family historian Lawrence Stone, "The scale of marital breakdowns in the West has no historical precedent" (Bander, 2004: 60). As a psychologist who has specialized in marital therapy for 20 years, I have found that the application of the practice and the metaphysical underpinnings of internal martial arts systems can restore and perpetuate goodwill between embattled spouses. The energetic principles of Taiji, Aikido, and the ageless wisdom of the *Yijing* are readily applicable to the tumultuous conditions intrinsic to the marital dojo.

Embroiled spouses may want a more lasting and satisfying relationship, but they often find it hard to, in *Yijing* terminology, "meet their partner halfway." As in martial arts practice, where rigidity of response predicts one's own uprooting, so too in the marital arena, defensiveness and a refusal to yield precludes harmonious interactions, contributes to marital disaffection, and can lead to the finality of divorce. The havoc and heartache couples and their children suffer in the aftermath of a divorce make it imperative that spouses acquire skills that will enable them to regulate their emotions and maintain harmonious relations.

In his book *Tai Chi According to the Yi Jing*, Stuart Olson emphasizes the universality and transferability of Taiji practice to the challenges that we face in our daily lives. He comments (2001: 13):

> Another aspect of [Taiji] practice is the development of wisdom, or mental accomplishment. When a person focuses his or her mind on the principles of Yielding, Relaxing, Adhering, and so on, these aspects then, over time, also become part of the person's temperament, bringing forth a more tranquil and less aggressive response to the obstacles in life.

In a similar vein, Tohei Koichi in *Aikido in Daily Life* conveys a similar sentiment (1996: 17):

> Just training at the training hall and being able to apply techniques to our opponents is not the entire great road of the universal... Of course, training hall practice is important, but it is not the only method. One only knows true Aikido... when he applies the principles of Aikido to everything he does.

Conflicts between partners are bound to arise in marriage because no two people are exactly alike. Differences of opinion, beliefs, and temperament do not imply incompatibility—nor does similarity of viewpoint and temperament guarantee smooth sailing. Partners who are tolerant of one another's differences are more likely to experience greater mutual affection than are partners who berate and coerce one another to conform to their personal points of view.

DRAWINGS ARE FROM THE FIRST IN A GRAPHIC NOVEL SERIES
BY OSCAR RATTI AND ADELE WESTBROOK TITLED: *TALES OF THE HERMIT.*

According to psychologist Erich Fromm, the very process of resolving conflict fosters resiliency in each of the partners and contributes to a more intimate relationship. "Real conflicts between two people ... are not destructive. They lead to clarification, they produce a catharsis from which both persons emerge with more knowledge and more strength" (Fromm, 1956: 93).

Drawing from the *Yijing's* vast reservoir of wisdom, Carol Anthony writes, "enduring stressful situations seems to be the only way we can transform what we have learned through the intellect into knowledge of the heart." She explains that the hexagram Taming Power of the Great refers to the repeated practice of finding our way through stressful situations as practicing "chariot driving" (Anthony, 1998: 115). In the hexagram Obstruction, we are counseled that "an obstruction that lasts only for a time is useful for self-development. This is the value of adversity" (Baynes, 1967: 153). Each of these hexagrams reminds embattled couples that the stressors to our daily life, including those of the marital dojo, provide an opportunity for inner enrichment and education.

Marital partners in conflict often assume a defensive posture when they are on the receiving end of their spouses' accumulated resentments. During such times, it is extremely difficult to maintain one's composure. Rather than give one's partner the benefit of the doubt, the tendency is to dismiss their concerns and counter-complain. Such defensiveness inflames an already worsening scenario and impedes reconciliation. In an atmosphere fueled by resentment, devoid of even the remnants of goodwill that once existed, feuding spouses typically denigrate one another's intent and impugn the other's character. "You always..." or "You never..." are the distorted versions of reality that spouses attribute to one another in the heat of battle. Such comments are demoralizing, increase frustration, and, if kept up indefinitely, engender the "moment of fatal peril," a nomenclature referred to in anger management groups that describes marital partners escalating conflict to the point of physical or verbal abuse. An example of such a tragic outcome was quoted recently in a local newspaper:

> Ralph Johnson, 30, pleaded guilty in San Jose to murdering his 34-year old wife during an argument that began over what to have for dinner. "She was serving macaroni and cheese and Tater Tots, and he wanted something more healthful," defense lawyer Stanley Golden said. "And it grew into an argument over everything in their lives. They fought off and on through the evening, and finally, shortly before midnight, he strangled her in the bathroom as she was getting ready to take a bath."

Tohei draws constructive advice for couples from his Aikido practice, the application of which might have effectively helped Mr. Johnson to prevent the fatal outcome. "If you realize that, whatever happens, whatever your wife says to you, this is the time to practice the single spot, not only will you keep your temper, you will actually make a great deal of progress. If you practice the single spot only at the training hall and lose it when you get home, you have wasted your effort" (Tohei, 1996: 161).

This disaster may also have been averted if Mr. Johnson had known and consulted the *Yijing*. Its advice in a hexagram called The Abysmal is applicable to and might have prevented this fatal outcome:

> The abyss is not filled to overflowing.
> It is filled only to the rim.
> No blame.

These lines are interpreted as follows: "...Danger comes because one is too ambitious... a man when in danger has only to proceed along the line of least resistance; thus he reaches the goal. Great labors cannot be accomplished in such times; it is enough to get out of the danger" (Baynes, 1967: 117).

The *Yijing's* underlying Daoist imperative cautions that, when we experience intense emotions that, if acted upon, would threaten our own or a loved one's well being, we can, for the time being, overcome the immediate danger by showing restraint. To aspire to anything more than the immediate cessation of hostility would, according to the *Yijing*, be foolhardy and in this instance could have contributed to this fatal outcome.

John Gottman, a leading marriage researcher and author of *Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, indicates that 81 percent of marriages fail when men refuse to accept their wives' influence. "Our study didn't really find that men should give up all of their personal power and let their wives rule their lives," Gottman writes.

> But we did find that the happiest, most stable marriages in the long run were those where the husband treated his wife with respect and did not resist power sharing and decision making with her.
>
> – Gottman, 2000: 101

The *Yijing* offers sage advice regarding the virtue of accepting a wife's influence in its commentary in the hexagram Resoluteness/Breakthrough. It advises that "if a man were to let himself be led, but not like a sheep, remorse would disappear" (Baynes, 1967: 169). Both Gottman and the *Yijing* are quick to point out that receptivity to and the acceptance of our partner's influence is not to be confused with subservience. Men usually resist meeting their partners halfway because they misconstrue accepting influence as a sign of weakness. On the contrary, the ability to accept one's partner's influence is a sign of strength and the mark of a courageous, flexible man.

One avid Taiji practitioner, who desires harmonious relations in his marriage, views Gottman's recommendation regarding accepting a wife's influence as analogous to the yielding principle intrinsic to daily Taiji practice. When applied to the marital arena, the yielding principle teaches us to substitute an adversarial response with one that is more receptive to our partner's concerns. By resisting the temptation proffered by our cantankerous mind to selfishly place one's own needs above those of a partner, a couple can ward off susceptibility to marital disaffection that typically presages divorce and enjoy feelings of tenderness and respect.

George Leonard, noted Aikido practitioner and educator, alludes to this dynamic in marriage. "The ability to surrender to your art is a mark of the master, whether the art is martial or marital.... Are you willing at times to yield totally on some long-standing dispute for the sake of growth and change in your relationship?" (Leonard, 1991: 149).

To aspire to harmonious interactions with one's partner requires a consideration of and accommodation to their point of view. This outcome is predicated upon our ability to listen attentively to our partner's concerns. Psychologists, spiritual teachers, and ancient sages agree on the importance of listening. According to Gottman, "the better able you are to listen to what your spouse has to say and to consider her perspective respectfully, the more likely it is that you'll be able to come up with a solution or approach to a problem that satisfies you both. If your ears are closed to your spouse's needs, opinions, and values, compromise just doesn't have a chance" (Gottman, 1995: 438).

The listening that Gottman refers to is non-defensive and non-reactive. While not easy to do, non-defensive listening conveys one's fascination with an opinion or belief that differs from one's' own. In a similar vein, Thich Nhat Hanh, renowned Buddhist teacher, advises: "Listening with compassion can help the other person to suffer less.... The other person might be our father, our son, our daughter, or our partner. Learning to listen to the other person can really help her to transform her anger and suffering" (Thich, 2001: 4).

Martial arts practice hones our skill at listening. In his book *Tai-Chi Ch'üan Its Effects and Practical Applications*, Yearning K. Chen (Chen, 1957: 7) identifies "auditive energy" (*ting jin*) as a sensitivity to one's training partner that can be developed through diligent practice of the Taiji solo form and various two-person practices such as Push Hands and Da Lu. The cultivation of this unusual form of sensitivity enhances self-development, Push Hands practice and is conducive to a more harmonious relationship with significant others such as one's spouse and children. The auditive energy that Chen refers to is certainly applicable to the marital dojo. It implies a receptivity to the energy field of one's partner, an enhanced sensitivity to the expression of their authentic concerns and the incentive to validate rather than respond defensively to what one's partner is saying.

Aikido practitioner and psychologist Richard Heckler views the marital domain as analogous to partners training in the dojo. For Heckler, the skill of listening is a fully embodied sentiment that is conveyed in the entirety of one's being. "To move effectively with one's partner through change requires the skill of listening. Listening requires a body that is present, open, and connected. It means quieting the internal noise about how you think things should be and blend with the concerns of the other" (Heckler, 1997: 77).

Aikido's "blending" principle mirrors the auditive energy that Chen refers to. By harmonizing with one's opponent, who for the moment and in the midst of gridlock may be one's spouse, the experience of being a combatant disappears and is replaced by a friend who is working with us, not against us.

These esoteric energetic principles of martial arts and the *Yijing* can and should be applied to the domain of interpersonal relations that include marriage and child rearing. By transferring the heightened awareness and enhancement of energy that is an outcome of one's daily practice to the marital relationship, we become a source of inspiration to our spouse rather than an opponent, increasing the likelihood that our marriages will endure and prosper.

A Living Scenario

The true case of Frank and his transformation from malevolent husband and parent to harmonious benefactor exemplifies the power of bringing the wisdom of these arts into our marriages. Frank is a motivated Taiji practitioner and also meditates. He awakens at five AM, meditates for an hour and then begins his Taiji and qigong practice. In the aftermath of these activities, he feels energized and confident. He likes to think of himself as someone who is generous in spirit, and responsive to the needs of others. To people in the outside world, he expresses all of these virtues. Unfortunately, Frank's wife is not the recipient of the "mensch" mentality that he brings to everyone but his spouse. In relation to his nuclear family and his wife in particular, he is at times more of an ogre than benefactor.

For example, in his Taiji practice, Frank takes pride in his ability to hold the meditative Universal Post posture (*Yuju Cong*) for over an hour, an example of his carefully honed patience and inner calm. Unfortunately, he does not transfer his patience to his wife and children, with whom he is often irritable and impatient. This is upsetting to his wife.

While Frank will go beyond the call of duty to help others outside his family, at home he reacts defensively and often minimizes the concerns of his wife, Marie, around housekeeping and the care of their children. She is impeccable in both domains. Rather then construe her fastidiousness in relation to the upkeep of their home and the needs of their children as beneficial to his family, Frank trivializes her concerns and encourages a *laissez faire* attitude. Marie wants Frank to show her the consideration of cleaning up after himself and not behaving in a slovenly manner. When Frank washes the dishes, he is careless, leaving bits of food on the plates. He begins household projects only to leave them unfinished. Marie attempts to be tolerant of Frank's deficiency in this arena, but she's frustrated at not having more of her needs met. Frank's threshold for a chaotic environment is much greater than his wife's and, while they attempt to compromise in this domain, Frank's wife often feels that she gets the short end of the stick.

Along with his Taiji practice, Frank is a student of Buddhism, particularly its emphasis on mindfulness in daily life. Recently, Frank achieved a breakthrough in his understanding of how his defensiveness has been corrosive to his marriage after reading a passage from Thich Nhat Hanh's book *Anger* (2001). Thich is both a poet and an avid gardener. Friends counseled him to abandon the vegetable garden so he could write more poetry. Thich replied that from the Buddhist point of view, it is important to be mindful in all activities in the course of one's day, be they mundane or esoteric. One does not take precedence over the other. "You cannot just sit there and write the story or the novel," Thich comments. "You have to do other things as well. You drink tea, cook breakfast, wash your clothes, water the vegetables.... You have to do them well" (Thich, 2001: 201).

Leonard (1991:150) compliments Thich's statement regarding the transferability of skills acquired in the course of refining one's art to other and what might be erroneously thought of as more mundane endeavors as follows:

> ... the principles of mastery can guide you whatever skill you seek to develop, whatever path you choose to walk... Ultimately, nothing in this life is 'commonplace,' nothing is 'in between.' The threads that join your every act, your every thought, are infinite. All paths of mastery eventually merge.

Thich's words inspired Frank to respond more empathetically to his wife's concerns. He no longer ignores the discrepancy that exists between the rigor that he applies to his martial art and his utter abandonment of his household responsibilities. He recognizes that he whole-heartedly applies himself to his martial arts practice, with the aim of excelling in his art. Now he is committed to applying to his marriage the same standards of excellence and mindfulness that he does to his martial arts practice. His goal is to become as exquisitely attuned to his wife and children as he is to applying the techniques and aesthetics of his Taiji practice. Frank now respects Marie's fastidiousness in the upkeep of their home as parallel to the way in which he continuously refines his own art. These days, during his early morning practice, as he holds the Universal Post posture, Frank reflects on Thich's commentary,

DEDICATION

I dedicate this article to my wife and training partner Tracy Rose ~ my inspiration.

"Enlightenment is not separate from washing dishes or growing lettuce. To learn how to live each moment of our daily life in deep mindfulness and concentration is the practice" (Thich, 2001: 202).

Closing Comments

My intent in writing this article has been to encourage the reader to impart to his wife and children the benefits, both martial and meditative, that have accrued as a result of his diligent practice of his art. It is to the entire family's benefit to have a more confident and serene husband and father in their midst.

Psychologists prescribe a *time out* regimen for feuding spouses to prevent further harm from being done to their relationship. The time out is an occasion for inner enrichment where each spouse independently of the other, is encouraged to supplant agitation and rancor with a more relaxed and sanguine response.

I know of no more efficient time out and self-soothing elixir than the repetition of a few rounds of Taiji. The repetition of these graceful movements dignifies all of one's actions so that one is disinclined to harbor resentment towards one's spouse in the aftermath of a disagreement. The *Yi Jing* refers to the resumption of good will between formerly disaffected spouses as "the return of understanding after an estrangement" where "everything must be treated tenderly and with care at the beginning, so that the return may lead to a flowering" (Baynes, 1967: 98).

A favorable rapprochement, such as that which occurred for Frank and Marie in the example cited above, is a predictable outcome for the martial arts practitioner who embodies in the totality of his actions the underlying tenets of his art.

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