

Practice

by Phyllis L. Thompson

"Why are you crying?" my martial arts teacher asked through the translator.

"Because it's so beautiful. Because I will never be able to do your family's *gongfu* like that."

We were on a balcony with a small group of US American teachers hired to help Chinese medical students learn English. When I had mentioned I wanted to learn a martial art, a Chinese colleague found a Heritage Master of an ancient practice to teach us. She and I studied with him together and she translated. The crew at the Foreign Teacher house had invited her and the Master to lunch so my housemates could see what we were learning.

Watching him was like seeing Baryshnikov do a 10-minute ballet from five feet away—perfect control and grace flowing through space. I was moved to tears.

My teacher leaned forward and spoke firmly. My Chinese colleague translated.

"How long you do my family *gongfu*?' he's asking."

"Three weeks."

"He says, 'I play this *gongfu* fifteen years. You practice fifteen years every day every day, be like me.'"

Then he jumped up and spread his arms. "Do not be so serious. Be happy!" The sudden shift made everyone laugh. He gestured over the balcony, over the whole company.

"We are rich! We enjoy the sun now, the good feeling of a full stomach," he put his hand on his belly as my colleague translated. "When we are poor, we enjoy cool dark, the good feeling of light and empty—both are good."

He was not just mouthing platitudes, I knew. This buoyant teacher was born and raised in Chinese high society. His grandmother learned a secret marital art in Beijing when she was part of the Last Emperor's court and passed it on within the family. His grandfather was a general in the Chinese National Army. Then Mao Zedong's Communists took over mainland China, and the family was stripped of its wealth. When my teacher refused to stop practicing the martial arts he knew, he was tortured and imprisoned during Mao's Cultural Revolution.

"Human life—," said my teacher in English on the balcony, flipping his palm up, then down and saying a Chinese word to the translator.

"Alternates," she said.

"Yes," said my teacher. "Human life alternates. When there is no alternates, we die."

"This is Old China teaching," he continued through the translator. "Life has many things. *Yang* and *yin*. Full and empty. Be happy for everything. Move with life."

* * *

It sounds good, doesn't it? *Move with life*. But I did not grow up learning how to do this. I'm an individualist, perfectionist, lucky USAmerican. I know how to set goals and plan. I try to keep my promises and work hard to get the job done. Our Chinese students often commented on that. "Americans work very hard," they said, but I'm not sure it was a compliment.

We American teachers focused on planning our classes and rewarding individual excellence. We operated on a timeline, sighting along chains of cause and effect, trying to predict and control what happened. We were not skilled at seeing circles and communities, at trying to accommodate what was happening around us. We kept our eyes on the prize. We did not check to see if each class was a harmonious whole, whatever the outcomes.

"We are very good at preparing to live," wrote the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh of modern Western life, "but not very good at living."

Like my Chinese *gongfu* teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh speaks about choosing to feel peaceful in the present from a deep well of terrible experience. He helped set up rural schools and health clinics while some of his colleagues protested the Vietnam War by setting themselves on fire. He helped rebuild villages that had been bombed in the war and wrote letters trying to find homes for orphan children. Yet he insists, "Peace is present right here and now, in ourselves and in everything we do and see. The question is whether or not we are in touch with it." How did these Masters learn to get in touch with inner peace in the face of fear?

Some lessons lie in stories they grew up with. When I got frustrated or depressed in China, more than once I was told the story of the farmer who lost a horse.

A farmer had a valuable horse that ran away. "What bad luck!" cried his neighbors. "Who knows?" said the farmer. Soon after, the horse returned,

bringing a wild herd with him. "What good luck!" cried the neighbors. "Who knows?" said the farmer. His son was working to gentle one of the horses and fell off, breaking his leg. "Bad luck!" cried the neighbors. "Who knows?" said the farmer. A warlord stormed into town and drafted all able-bodied young men, leaving the injured son behind. "Good luck!" said the neighbors. "Who knows?" said the farmer.

"Why do they find this story reassuring?" I thought at first, but eventually I saw how it worked for them. My students did not think they had much control in their lives. When elaborate plans for a speech contest were disrupted at the last minute because a visiting dignitary wanted the hall, or all my students disappeared for community service during the week I had scheduled a mid-term, they mentioned the farmer who lost a horse. *"Who knows?"* they implied.

"Did you do your best?" they asked when I complained about some aborted project. If I said Yes, they assured me, "You can do no more."

This is not how I was raised, but I see the value in it. Don't worry too much about outcomes? Not a very mainstream American message. My people tend to look at what we do, at what's been accomplished to judge success or failure. My Chinese friends were suggesting I adjust to what comes without judging. Do my best in a world where cause and effect are not linear. Also that I consider the value of intention. My mother did often tell me about gifts, "It's the thought that counts."

* * *

Yet, even if I accept the unAmerican notion that we are not in control of what happens around us, how can I follow my Master's advice to "Be happy!" in the face of *Who knows?* How do I learn to be good at living, as Thich Nhat Hanh suggests?

Both Buddhism and Daoism teach that feelings are transient. (*Actually, they tell us everything is transient, including our precious selves. This is clearly true, but I grew up in a nation that spends a lot of energy trying to distract us from that thought, so. . . . Feelings are easier.*) Feelings are like television shows, Thich Nhat Hanh says—if we don't like what's on, we can change the channel. Everything alternates, said the Chinese Master, then he told two stories about his time in prison.

In the Cultural Revolution, he was jailed and put on heavy work details with many others. To entertain themselves, the prisoners used to save grains of rice from their scant meals, put them on the floor of their cells, and bet on which ant would get to their grain first. (*Be happy whatever comes, I guess.*) In one of his cells, the floor was covered with water during the rainy season so, every night

for a month, he allowed each foot to dry by lifting a knee and standing on one leg for half an hour, then switching.

He survived, he said, because he was optimistic. He accepted alternating *yin* and *yang* and tried to be happy and healthy. On our balcony, he settled into a meditative posture in his chair.

"When you go very, very deep in stillness," he said with his eyes closed, "then you begin to dance." He sat quiet, then slowly moved his limbs until he was up and waltzing around the balcony.

"When you are at the height of dancing, then you start to be still." He slowed himself down again and sat in the chair, closing his eyes. Then his eyes popped open, and he looked around the group with a smile.

"Life has many things," he said. "When you are strong, be firm like a rock. When you are weak, be flexible like air. Be happy for everything. Move with life."

It's a practice. Every day every day for fifteen years be grateful for being alive. Turn the channel on my thoughts out of impatience into mindful breathing and a smile. Notice the beauties and opportunities life brings. Move with life.

That's a lot to ask of a deep-steeped individualist perfectionist. It's a lot to practice, but maybe a statewide order to shelter in place gives me a little time.



In case you also have a little time. . .

- Alan Watts, the man who most famously introduced Daoism to North America tells the story of the Chinese farmer:
<https://wellsbaum.blog/alan-watts-story-of-the-chinese-farmer/>
- Benedictine monk David Steindl-Rast's TED Talk on gratitude:
https://www.ted.com/talks/david_steindl_rast_want_to_be_happy_be_grateful
- Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh on breathing and smiling:
Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life
(compiled of excerpts from many of his books)