

# Finding the Master Within:

## A Treatise on Self-Discovery from The 47 Ronin Story

by Shifu Dr. Tim Thompson ©



### Introduction

Every living creature on this earth, from an ameba to a human being, carries within it the inborn desires to live and to be aware, at all times, that it is alive. But simply being alive and knowing that you are alive are not nearly enough for you if you are human. You also want - in fact; you need -- to be happy, to feel lasting joy.

The only natural way to consistently feel such joy from moment to moment is to harvest the fruits of your own conscious efforts to discover your unique life purpose. The Chinese sage Hsueh-Feng pointed out, "The whole world is you; yet you keep thinking there is something else." In other words, your mind is your personal portal to the divinely blissful reality behind all physical manifestation.

The infallible *Law of Attraction* states that whatever you think, feel and focus your attention on will manifest itself in your life according to your true intentions and your beliefs about yourself. In fact, everything that you experience as your environment and circumstances is a reflection of your own psychological state of awareness at any given moment. In practical terms, this means that whatever your ego-identity perceives as objective reality is actually a holographic projection of your own mind.

In this light, the purest way to make a meaningful positive difference in the world is to discover your true nature, because that level of self-discovery automatically involves broadcasting a steady flow of healing vibrations in all directions at all times. Your true nature is the spiritual blueprint which lies deep underneath your personal identity. The intensity of the

healing vibrations that are constantly radiating from within your spiritual blueprint is such that they exert a transformative influence on anyone who enters your presence.

There is no easy method for discovering your true nature. Nonetheless, spiritual awakening is achievable for anyone with the desire and courage to consistently impose on him-/herself the most arduous and self-revealing psychological process imaginable – over a long period of time. The self-discovery process is especially challenging because it requires you to allow all of your emotional reactions to freely express themselves internally. This enables you to learn how to release your unhealthy emotional patterns while simultaneously strengthening your healthy ones.

Realizing that your feelings are the driving force behind every choice you make is the key to accelerating your momentum toward the highest state of self-knowing, which frees you to create your reality in each moment. Human feelings manifest either as emotions or as physical sensations. When they express as emotions, they use your body as a canvas upon which you paint your projected self-image as a picture, or as a lump of clay out of which you mold yourself and your circumstances into a sculpture that reveals your actual state of being. That is why true self-discovery necessarily involves becoming intimately familiar with what is happening inside your body, as well as within your mind. That is also why positive affirmations by themselves are simply not enough to take you to the “Promised Land” of self-knowing. In order to develop expertise at consciously creating joy in your life, you must exercise your mind and body in a carefully coordinated process.

Clearly then, since practicing martial arts is an intensive mind-body monitoring and cultivating activity, it can be one of the most direct routes to the level of self-discovery that is the foundation of true happiness. If you are one who embraces martial arts as a vehicle for attaining your highest fulfillment as a human being, then by practicing your art, you are necessarily sharpening your awareness of your physical and mental reactions to different types of challenges. As a result, as your practice deepens, the same character attributes demonstrated by Oishi, the lead Samurai in John Allyn’s classic book The 47 Ronin Story, are sure to blossom in you when you least expect them.

This black belt paper is designed to shed light on seven of the numerous character attributes that serious martial artists cultivate automatically by being dedicated to self-discovery. In my mind, the greatest value in reading The 47 Ronin Story lies in being exposed to Oishi’s thought process as he pursued the fulfillment of his duty to the Asano House after Lord Asano’s execution. I believe Oishi provided a realistic “living” example of how the characteristics listed below helped him to effectively lead an anxious team of warriors through a variety of improvised strategic actions while waiting for the optimum time to strike at Kira (the architect of Lord Asano’s execution). During the remainder of this paper I will discuss the role that each of these characteristics played in the Ronins’ successful mission, how these attributes relate to martial arts training, and how they can contribute overall to anyone’s self-discovery process.

## Seven Key Self-Discovery Attributes

1. Patience
2. Persistence
3. Loyalty
4. Integrity
5. Leadership
6. Vision
7. Empathy

### Patience

As soon as he learned of Lord Asano's demise, Oishi knew what response his duty dictated that he was to make. Yet he also knew that blindly attempting to lash out at Kira in the heat of rage was the least likely route to successfully accomplishing his goal of avenging his lord. So despite the powerful emotions that spurred him forward and inspired his subordinates (including the emotionally impulsive second-in-command Kataoka) to keep their fighting skills sharp, Oishi forced himself to plan carefully, condition the enemies' perceptions, and wait until the optimum time to strike. The first characteristic that enabled Oishi to balance his feelings was patience.



Patience is the ability to calmly endure hardships or challenges. Patience is forbearance; perseverance. Patience is also essential to discovering your true nature. It is common knowledge that most of us use only a small fraction of our brain capacity, which is our capacity to be aware of a vast amount of information flowing through our environment. Therefore, most of what you are truly capable of remains hidden from you unless you dedicate yourself to exploring the unknown regions of your mind.

This kind of self-exploration is extremely tricky and arduous because the thinking and feeling habits that the social order has imposed on your mind through its cultural conditioning mechanisms are always working to blind you to your unlimited freedom to choose your responses to the challenges you face. In order to travel down into the deeper regions of your

oceanic mind, you must first slip past the gatekeepers – those ego-driven thought habits that automatically trigger themselves in their single-minded quest to protect you from all sorts of danger. These gatekeepers know exactly how to sow fear and other forms of discomfort in your mind to prompt you to seek safety. Therefore, although your egoic gatekeepers are always merely trying to do their assigned job of protecting you from harm, when their fear-based methods spill over into your psychological guidance system, you are likely to feel intense pressure to abort your quest for self-knowledge. This pressure shows up as extreme physical and/or psychological discomfort.

If you are inclined to shrink away from the first signs of physical or psychological discomfort, practicing martial arts can help you cultivate the ability to calmly endure those uncomfortable feelings. Martial arts demand that you systematically explore what is behind the familiar patterns by which you function in your daily life. By doing so, you naturally come face to face with the physical and emotional parts of yourself that hold tension in place as a way to block access to the secrets underneath. Thus, the deeper your practice takes you, the more completely you replace fear with dogged determination to remove all false notions of your capabilities. As your transformation unfolds, your patience grows, and as your patience grows, the momentum of your self-discovery accelerates. Over time, you become a pillar of serenity upon which your friends and family members can lean in troubled times.

## **Persistence**

Persistence is uninterrupted effort. Persistence is tenacity combined with a goal-oriented focus. One of my favorite folk sayings is, “There is nothing more powerful than a made-up mind.” When you decide what you want in your life and faithfully hold that vision in your mind despite experiencing hardships in the pursuit of your goal, then the Universe molds a piece of itself around the specifications of your thoughts and presents itself to you according to the intensity of your desire. In fact, your thoughts literally function as blueprints for building the structural frameworks that best express the divinely defined purposes of the phenomena that you help create. Any thought that you dwell on with sufficient feeling inevitably sets nature’s energy pattern-organizing process in motion, so the energy patterns that are vibrationally compatible with what you see and believe gather together inside your perceptual field (commonly known as your aura) and dutifully obey the formative instructions hidden within.

Ultimately, Oishi was able to demonstrate the fulfillment of this sacred co-creation process by not giving in to the despair that would sometimes try to engulf him when he could see no clear path to achieving his goal. Despite the fears and doubts that assailed him at times, Oishi refused to allow appearances to dictate the outcome to him. He never lost sight of his twin goals of maintaining the honor of his men and repaying Kira for his ruthless deceitfulness. Throughout the ordeal of planning the strike against Kira, Oishi was continually haunted by the painful awareness that Ronin, or Samurai with no lord to serve, were highly susceptible to

deteriorating into a state of animalistic subsistence. Such was Oishi's determination not to allow his men to sink into a subhuman state that he even risked losing their trust and respect by pretending to fall away from his true convictions. His purpose in this ploy was to sway Kira's protectors to believe that the Ronin had succumbed to hopelessness. Meanwhile, the persistent fire of vengeance for Lord Asano's death drove Oishi relentlessly toward its fulfillment.

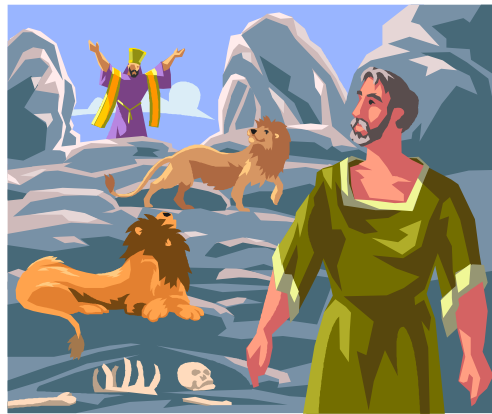


In the life of a martial artist, persistence is one of the factors that separate success from failure in the application of diligently practiced techniques. No matter how much you train, if you encounter a situation in which you must choose to fight, the uniqueness of that situation will automatically limit your ability to carefully analyze it according to any set pattern. In a case like that, rather than following a pre-determined sequence of movements, you will simply have to allow your instincts to guide your responses. Upon receiving whatever intuitive guidance you get, you will either act without conviction or demonstrate persistence by seeing your choice through to the end. To give up when it is inappropriate to do so is to nullify all of your training by offering encouragement to your attacker. Acting with persistence or tenacity, on the other hand, simultaneously makes your techniques more effective and increases the likelihood that your attacker will question the wisdom of his actions.

## **Loyalty**

Loyalty is faithfulness to a person, group or duty. True loyalty is rooted in mutual trust, which functions as a gatekeeper, opening a portal through which a deep connection or complete exchange of energy can occur between two people. If you truly care about another person's well-being, then you will easily treat as a sacred trust any mutual agreement that you make with that person. You also will not hesitate to stand with that person through good and bad times, consistently demonstrating your desire to see him or her thrive. Furthermore, true loyalty cannot be bought or sold, because it is rooted in gratitude for the love and care that you have received from others.

Although patience and persistence are the first two attributes that came to my mind when I began to consider Oishi's character, Samurai warriors typically measured their honor and self-worth based on their degree of loyalty to the Samurai code and to their employers. In fact, Samurai often descended into disreputable behaviors shortly after being reduced to Ronin status because they had no cause to serve as the object of their loyalty. What made Oishi so remarkable was that while he realized fully how tenuous his men's psychological states were, he was able to orchestrate a successful attack against Kira even with despair gnawing at his and the others' emotions. Such was the steadfastness of his loyalty to everything that Lord Asano had built. Ultimately, Oishi's true loyalty was to the Samurai principles that governed his identity and actions.



The arduous nature of martial arts makes loyalty a key source of inspiration and energy from which practitioners can draw to sustain the focus and discipline required to train consistently hard. Serious martial artists are loyal to their schools and teachers because teachers and students develop an intimate knowledge of each other's strengths and weaknesses, and mutual trust functions as the primary bonding agent between them. Additionally, like Oishi, remaining loyal to your principles (particularly those associated with the self-discovery process) will assure success in your efforts to realize your true purpose and potential.

## **Integrity**

When Oishi lost his lord, he became painfully aware that the only things he had left were his relationships with his men and his own integrity, or moral wholeness. Furthermore, the only one of these remaining assets that he could truly count on was his integrity, because that was all he could control. For me, moral wholeness is synonymous with internal consistency in applying evaluative standards to our assessments of what others say and do. In

other words, if you apply the same standards and expectations to yourself as you do to others, you have integrity. For example, if someone insults you and you retaliate by verbally lashing out, then integrity demands that you refrain from justifying your own behavior and from harshly judging others who have responded similarly to insults.



The expression “To thine own self be true” honors the central role that integrity plays in the self-discovery process. Having integrity means being completely honest with yourself at all times, especially when you are not especially proud of something you have said or done. Integrity is the quality that allows you to discover the true roots of any difficulties that you may be having in your relationships with yourself or others.

In order to become the best martial artist that you can be, you must train yourself to refrain from adopting beliefs about your own capabilities without first exploring them. Gautama Siddhartha (the Buddha) reportedly said, “Accept nothing that is unreasonable; however, reject nothing as unreasonable without proper examination.” If you have never tried a thing, it is best not to form any opinion about whether you can do it well. This healthy mental approach leaves you in the best possible position to devote all of your energy to finding out what you can actually do.

Being completely honest with yourself also means being neither overly generous nor too stingy in assessing your talent and skill levels in different aspects of your practice. If you readily accept your strengths and weaknesses as they are, you will not feel a strong desire to compare yourself to others who may learn movements more quickly, or who may have more flexible bodies than you do. Then you will happily tailor your practice routine to fit your unique physical and mental characteristics. Ultimately, this is one of the primary keys to mastering your art.

## **Leadership**

“Leaders are born; not made” is an opinion that I have often heard during conversations about how to develop leadership skills. Each time that I have heard this said I have found

myself wanting to point out the vast difference between using your God-given charisma to manipulate people to give you what you want and genuinely tuning in to others' needs so you can help them discover their true selves. Because a leader is simply someone who others are following, a self-serving manipulator is as much a leader as the virtuous guide who teaches you how to think and choose for yourself. However, leading people in healthy ways requires extensive training in a wide variety of human relations skills.

In all aspects of life, destroying things is always easier and less time-consuming than building things. Major morale-busting mistakes may take only a few minutes to occur, but their ill effects may take months, or even years, to overcome. Consequently, effective leaders are the ones who take seriously the responsibility of building a smoothly functioning team of people with diverse strengths, weaknesses and backgrounds. The art of blending such diversity is very subtle; therefore it demands a consciously developed sensitivity that can only be cultivated through accumulated direct experience.



The American College Dictionary defines leadership as “the ability to lead.” The use of the word ability here is significant because this quality must be cultivated, no matter how much natural talent you may have. As Grandmaster Dennis Brown occasionally says, “There’s a big difference between knowing how to do something and being able to do it.” To me this means there is no substitute for constant correct practice. No matter how quickly you can learn to imitate an expert, the only way you can develop the ability to consistently respond to stressful situations with relaxed assertiveness is to explore and practice your craft until it becomes an inseparable part of your life.

Learning to listen with empathy, to resolve conflicts involving yourself or between others, to support the growth and development of talented team members, and to organize and monitor task distribution and completion are just a few of the necessary abilities that effective leaders must cultivate. In his 1990 book entitled Principle-Centered Leadership, best-

selling author Stephen R. Covey (*The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*) isolated eight traits exhibited by principle-centered leaders. According to Covey, principle-centered leaders are:

1. Continually learning
2. Service oriented
3. Radiate positive energy
4. Believe in other people
5. Lead balanced lives
6. See life as an adventure
7. Synergistic
8. People who exercise for self-renewal

As you can see, to learn continually implies constant sharpening of the leader's skills overall. As for the other traits, each of them involves making a conscious effort to stay healthy in every possible way and to assist others in doing the same.

In *The 47 Ronin Story*, Oishi was a consummate leader by any reasonable measure. Everything he did throughout the story was motivated by his desire to help his men maintain their honor while striving to achieve their goal of vengeance. Oishi always remained mindful of the power of leading by example. Even when he engaged in self-debasing behaviors, he did so as part of a carefully conceived strategy to influence the perceptions of Kira's protectors so that they would relax their surveillance. Deliberately creating the appearance that he had abandoned his considerable Samurai discipline was the greatest sacrifice that Oishi could ever make, but he did so because he felt responsible for the fate of his men.

Aside from his strategic deception, Oishi diligently practiced all eight of Covey's identified leadership characteristics. He kept his ear to the ground at all times to keep from missing the perfect moment for he and his men to attack. His dominant desire was to serve his men, in whom he maintained a strong belief. So even when Oishi felt like hopelessness was about to overtake him, he forced himself to radiate positive energy to keep his men's morale up. Oishi's most outstanding trait was his ability to maintain a balanced life under the harshest of psychological conditions. That is precisely why his deception strategy was so successful. He also adapted well to changing conditions because of his ability to keep his thoughts focused in the present moment. Another factor that contributed to the Ronin's successful attack was Oishi's ability to devise a strategy that incorporated the strengths of each of his key assistants. He was truly a synergistic leader. Finally, Oishi never allowed himself to get too far out of fighting condition so that he could seize the moment when the time came to strike at Kira.

Like Oishi, a true martial artist leads by example while dedicating him-/herself to protecting the well-being of others.

## **Vision**

Having acute eyesight does not guarantee that you have clear vision. The type of vision to which I am referring here is synonymous with deep understanding and insight. In order to cultivate this kind of clarity, you must learn to hold your attention deep inside your dantien (literally your physical core), from where you can consciously access the state of total physical and mental relaxation. The greatest challenge facing you as you seek to enter and remain in this quiet state is mastering the art of accurately seeing and purposefully choosing what you really want. And you must accomplish this even while all of your accumulated thinking and feeling patterns are clawing at your mind to gain its constant attention. The next section will give you a detailed insight into the level of vision that Oishi had attained by explaining the process by which you can permanently shift your primary mental focus from outside of your core to inside it.



### **Mastering the Art of Choosing Wisely**

Every day you make millions of choices. You choose what to wear, when and what to eat, what route you will take to work, and so on. Actually, your unconscious thought habits make so many of your choices for you that you are consciously aware of only a small fraction of them – usually only the choices that require the most consideration. And even your conscious choices are driven primarily by your unconscious patterns of thinking and feeling.

If you look carefully enough, you will see that the social conditioning to which you have been subjected throughout your life permeates and surrounds all of your thought patterns. So unless you have developed great skill at brushing aside the intense gravitational pull exerted by that ongoing conditioning process, every choice you make is trapped in the net of your unique cultural perspective and individual experiences.

Making important choices about what to do with your life tends to set you on pathways that can be difficult to adjust. And making such choices without first closely observing how social conditioning processes have affected your perceptions and thought patterns is like jumping out of the driver's seat of a moving vehicle. Whenever you abdicate responsibility for shaping the outcomes of your initial decisions and their corresponding actions, you create devastating collisions with a host of unhealthy consequences for yourself and others. That is an almost guaranteed way to end up being victimized by the outcomes you produce.

On the other hand, when your mind is fully healed (freed from its conditioning), you make all of your choices with a clear understanding of a wide range of options that are always available to you. The key to achieving this healed mental state is tapping directly into a source of awareness that is immune to the limiting and debilitating currents of ego (physical) consciousness. The Chinese sage Seng-Ts'an asked, "If you work on your mind with your mind, how can you avoid immense confusion?" In other words, to truly clear your mind you must learn to open it completely as a conduit through which the Infinite Consciousness of God can flow without the inevitable distortions caused by the ego's input. Making choices that will transform your life requires you to relax your grip on the beliefs that you have adopted under the influence of your conditioned mind. Once your mind is sufficiently relaxed and able to conduct divine (intuitive) insights, only then are you truly ready to choose wisely on important matters such as selecting a career or marriage partner, having children, buying a home, etc.

Your ego's primary function is to protect your body/mind lens complex from the dangers arising from living within the field of matter. To accomplish this vital task, your ego automatically monitors and maintains your various biological cycles and functions, as well as activating your "fight or flight" responses in dangerous situations. Essentially, then, your ego is the Chief of Security for the Ruler of All Things. Unfortunately, however, because the human experience has trapped you inside the illusion that your physical presence is your real identity, you have delegated the Ruler's decision-making authority to the security chief. This is merely a brief summary of the down side to living in a physical body. The next section breaks the problem down further.

### **How You Form Habits**

Your five physical senses never stop seeking and making contact with the various sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and textures that always surround you. This constant sensory activity was characterized by the Indian Yogi Sri Yukteswar in his book The Holy Science as the trigger for the most powerful known form of hypnosis. Its hypnotic effect results from your inability to resist the overwhelming temptation to identify yourself as an animated physical object. The hypnosis occurs because, as Dr. Muata Ashby explained in his book Egyptian Yoga, Volume I, the constant stimulation of your physical senses keeps you from focusing adequate attention on the process by which spiritual qualities are transmitted to your organs of external perception.

Ultimately, not focusing deeply enough on the underlying reality of your existence causes you to forget your divine origins. Then once you have forgotten who and what you really are, your only remaining choice is to think of yourself as a lump of clay controlled by a computer-like brain. The big challenge resulting from identifying with the body instead of with the spirit is that your perception of the physical universe must then rely mainly on impressions received through your individualized mind and your five senses. Since the senses can only contact the ocean of life on its most superficial or surface level, they cannot help you comprehend life as it actually is (its essence or substance). What you perceive instead is a surface-level interpretation that falsely convinces you that physical forms are more real and more important than the spiritual energy that enables these forms to exist. And as all great spiritual teachers have insisted throughout humanity's time on Earth, our identification with and our desperate attachment to this hypnotic illusion is the root cause of all human suffering.

Once you have given in to the great delusion of limited existence or scarcity of energy (caused by ignorance of your divine nature), you automatically commit yourself to rely only on your senses for knowledge of the world around you. In doing so, you lose touch with your natural ability to feel and use your life force in harmony with the world. In their expanded role, which gives them more responsibility than they can ultimately handle, your senses play a major role in the formation of your habits of thought, speech, and action, as well as giving you what you then think of as the only important data about your external environment.

#### **Practice makes Permanent**

As your senses make their contacts, they send information to your brain by way of fiber optic wires called nerves. Once these sense impressions have been captured by your brain, your mind registers, organizes, and stores them for further use according to your rational and emotional make-up. Therefore, if something in your surroundings stimulates you to think of an action that you have enjoyed in the past, your subconscious memory of that sense impression automatically prompts you to want that experience again. Furthermore, the more intense the pleasure was that you felt from a past action, the more likely you will be to repeat it.

This mechanism of recording, organizing, and storing sense impressions causes habits of thought, feeling, and action to cut their own unique patterns into your mind (like grooves in a CD) in every area of your life. As such, a habit can be your greatest friend or your most destructive enemy. Consider how frustrating your life would be if every day you had to learn how to brush your teeth or dress yourself, or how to add ten plus ten. Yet at the same time, habits of drug dependency, sexual promiscuity, overeating, excessive anger, power addiction, and/or other self-destructive activities regularly ruin many people's lives. Everything you do on a repeated basis, from kicking a soccer ball or driving a car, to fighting or disrupting classrooms, becomes a habit. From this understanding of the habit creation process, you can clearly see that by accepting the illusion that you are a physical being rather than a spiritual one, you place yourself at the mercy of any kind of habit that you consciously or unconsciously believe will make you happy.

Oishi clearly demonstrated great vision throughout the ordeal experienced by the 47 Ronin. Because he was not blinded by his perceptual habits, he never lost sight of his original purpose, even in the most difficult times. His strategic understanding of the process for achieving his goals was so sophisticated that, on several occasions, he was able to quickly sense and respond to the need for the subtlest of adjustments in his plan.

This kind of insightful vision is what enabled the great physicist Albert Einstein to respond simply yet powerfully when asked how he would approach solving a catastrophic problem if he had only an hour to work on it. He reportedly thought for a bit, and then answered, "I'd spend the first 55 minutes determining the root of the problem, and the last five minutes solving it." Essentially, although Dr. Einstein did not directly state his underlying understanding of the intimate relationship between root causes and effects/outcomes, his response showed his deep insight into the dynamics of effective problem solving and outcomes creation.

Similarly, Oishi consistently displayed a highly developed ability to tune in to the roots of problems and to act in harmony with his awareness of those roots. Much like the eldest brother in an ancient Chinese story about the power of deep insight, Oishi not only had vision; he also had great confidence in and easy access to his ability to gain and apply deep insight to even the most mundane of actions. The story below provides an excellent vehicle for thinking on these things:

*A lord of ancient China once asked his physician, a member of a family of healers, which of them was the most skilled in the art.*

*The physician, whose reputation was such that his name became synonymous with medical science in China, replied, "My eldest brother sees the spirit of sickness and removes it before it takes shape, so his name does not get out of the house.*

*"My elder brother cures sickness when it is still extremely minute, so his name does not get out of the neighborhood.*

*"As for me, I puncture veins, prescribe potions, and massage skin, so from time to time my name gets out and is heard among the lords."*

*Pg. 1, The Art of War, Thomas Cleary*

As the story suggests, the physician was indicating that his eldest brother was the most skillful healer because he did not have to wait until problems had exploded into the light of day before attempting to restore proper balance. Rather, he had such a deep understanding of and insight into the dynamics of energy flow within the human body that he could anticipate the path that imbalance and disease would take and then cancel their journey at its starting point. In short, the eldest brother had true vision.

In the long run, a similar sort of true vision may be the most gratifying ability that a dedicated martial artist cultivates after many years of diligent self-exploration. By practicing for many years the physical and mental patterns inherent in martial movements, a true artist learns to relax and focus his or her deepest attention inside the dantien at will. The cultivation of this skill brings with it the constant awareness of one's essential unity with the source of all life. To rest in this awareness is to live as simply and as effectively as humanly possible because the artist never loses sight of the roots from which all manifested phenomena grow.

## **Empathy**

Empathy, the final characteristic demonstrated by Oishi that I intend to cover in this paper, is perhaps at least as elusive as the cultivation of clear vision. Empathy is the ability to understand a situation from another person's point of view, regardless of whether or not you like or agree with that person's perspective. Showing empathy toward another person requires you to attend fully to their behaviors in each interaction with all five of your senses (whole body listening). Oishi consistently demonstrated his ability to do this by staying tuned in to the emotional roller coaster that he and his men were riding as time and opportunities to execute their plans seemed to be slipping away from them.



When practiced effectively, empathic Listening dissolves barriers, encourages harmonious mutual influence, amplifies persuasive skills, and heals emotional wounds. Empathic listening is the purest form of curiosity about others, and is the only human relations skill that produces a deep understanding of others. The benefits of this life-transforming practice do not end there, however. By cultivating the habit of listening empathically, you will also be blessed with a deep awareness of how your own feelings shape your perceptions of others. Seeing yourself clearly in this way unlocks the door that leads to the key skill shared by all true masters: the ability to consciously and consistently choose and create what you really want in your life. The final section of this paper can help you visualize how your own listening habits may be interfering with your development of empathic listening skills. Once you are

aware of the obstacles blocking your self-discovery, you can more freely use martial arts training to help you overcome them.

### **Let Go and Listen**

Nearly 40 years ago, the once-popular musician Sylvester Stewart (Sly & the Family Stone) wrote and sang: "Everything I like is nice; that's why I try to have it twice." I do not know if Sly realized how profound that song lyric was, but I do know that his statement describes the habit formation process that I covered in the above material about vision. To summarize, if you experience something that feels good to you, you will seek to repeat that experience in order to recreate the good feeling. In contrast, if you experience something that feels bad to you, you will seek to avoid that experience.

Unfortunately, this same habit formation process probably has you trapped in listening behavior patterns that appear to protect you from emotional pain but instead prevent you from accessing the Infinite Joy that is your true nature. Listening is an act of absorbing another's thoughts and feelings, so you must be able to do it with relatively little internal communication noise if you intend to control what you contribute to the dynamics of your interactions. Internal communication noise refers to any psychological process that keeps you trapped in the past, the future, or in a state of judgmental stagnation that interferes with your capacity to fully tune into the present moment. This type of noise diverts you from your true purpose by screaming constantly in your inner ear, drowning out the whispering of God's Voice that transmits continuously on your intuitive perception channels.

If you are one of the billions of people who identify with their ego (physical) minds rather than the intuitive (Spirit) mind, you have been listening only on the surface of your relationships. By listening superficially, you have been wasting a vast amount of your energy in vain efforts to eliminate emotional pain from your life. Emotional pain is manufactured by your ego, which, due to its nature as a matter-binding force, cannot shake itself free from the poisonous effects of fear and doubt. And as long as you move through life afraid of the psychological threats that you imagine are lurking around the corner of every interaction, you probably do not feel safe to fully open your heart to the infinite possibilities that are always available to you in the present moment.

If guarding your heart brings you comfort (even though that comfort is based on a false sense of security), such a feeling of safety seems plenty real to you, of course. In that case, you probably hold on tightly to whatever listening practices you think will keep you safe from excessive heartbreak. Therefore, it is understandable that you would have difficulty visualizing the effects of letting your guard down in your interactions with people.

Admittedly, dropping your guard is scary at first because doing so exposes you to bombardment from the widest possible range of human emotions – both positive and negative. However, the more deeply you value your own worth as an expression of God's Infinite Beauty, the less inclined you will be to allow others' feelings to overpower yours, and the more courage

you will find within yourself to practice letting your guard down completely, little by little. After all, only by letting your guard down completely can you experience the fullness of God's Love!

The Indian philosopher Jiddhu Krishnamurti explained, "Life is relationship, which is expressed through contact with things, with people, and with ideas. In understanding relationship we shall have the capacity to meet life fully, adequately." He added, "Relationship, surely, is the mirror in which you discover yourself. Without relationship you are not; to be is to be related; to be related is existence." Unfortunately, there is no guaranteed way to prevent sadness and other unpleasant emotions from infiltrating our relationships. Therefore, even if you succeed in building a fortress around your heart and encircling it with trenches and barbed wire, you will only broadcast to the world that you are afraid to get hurt, and skillful people readers will easily see through your stoic disguise. In contrast, once you have been consistently practicing experiencing life with your heart more and more open and have built up a diverse portfolio of successful human relations outcomes, you will find it increasingly easy to lay aside the habitual listening strategies you have been using to cope with people's differences.

Reaching this stage means you have replaced your automatic emotional reactions with the much more productive habit of listening to the Presence of God within your heart. This level of attainment is obviously beneficial to you as a serious martial artist because it enables you to receive continuous guidance about what choices you should make from moment to moment. Reaching this stage is also a clear sign that you are ready to transform the way you listen to others. Ultimately this is the key to mastering "the art of fighting without fighting."

Once you feel strongly grounded in your own true being, you will no longer have any use for feeling overwhelmed by other people's issues or lacking control over your emotional reactions. Then you will be able to absorb their life energy and connect with it at a deeper level than you had previously imagined was possible; without losing your sense of self. At that point, your capacity to give and receive love and to perceive the underlying purpose and value of each of your relationships will blossom in ways you cannot now fathom. No other kind of surprise could ever make you happy like being connected at all times to the desires of your own heart and to the hearts of others – something like Oishi.