

# Resistance

by David Berman

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At the age of ten, I had four impacted molars removed; what I remember most vividly is my struggle against the anesthesia. It's not that I wanted to experience the surgery but that fighting the loss of consciousness seemed the most natural thing to do. I did it spontaneously, just as I would have struggled against drowning, and when I regained consciousness, it was from a dream of struggle that I awoke. I took the experience as a failure, both of awareness and of will, and sometime during the next few weeks I conceived the following fantasy: If at the moment of death one can remain clear, can remain aware of whatever that transition is, then the self that is so aware can remain intact and persist, but if at that moment one panics, or struggles, or even blinks, then oblivion is certain.

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As a young actor beginning my career, I got a piece of advice from an older colleague. He pointed out a somewhat sentimental performance that neither of us liked and said that many actors, when asked to play a strong emotion, make the mistake of doing so, and that this produces one-dimensional portrayals of humanity. When real people experience strong emotion, he said, most of them resist it, and it is their very struggle that expresses the emotion's power. Unless you want to appear as a self-indulgent neurotic, he said, don't act the emotion, act the resistance.

Now, although this advice proved to have its limitations as far as acting was concerned, it also had a certain wisdom, for following it not only produced an effective imitation of emotional distress, it produced the emotions themselves. I found that I only had to put myself on guard and, sure enough, the very emotion I was prepared to resist would rise as if to the challenge. But that made me wonder, if resistance is completely counterproductive, why do people do it?

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This latter memory strums the chord of the former and of so many memories in between that I have spent the last week writing up and tossing out memories. I've had trouble choosing among them because they're all relevant to the story I'm trying to tell: they're all memories of struggle, of opposition, of resistance. I was in fact a member of the "opposition", committed to the civil rights "struggle" and to war and draft "resistance", and would have fiercely opposed the suggestion, had I heard it then, that there might be a form of advocacy or, more generally, of doing good, that does not involve setting oneself in opposition.

But it is also true that I spent much time and energy fruitlessly opposing that which was not a question of conscience and in which no lives were at stake. Among my greatest opponents have been my body, my hair, my job, my leisure, sleep, wakefulness, noise, silence, traffic, weather, the words of others, and time, both its speed and its slowness. Who would ever have thought that I might learn to make peace with such intractable foes by making a study of fighting?

I'm being disingenuous. I am a teacher of Wu Mei Pai, the "Five Plum School" of Chinese martial art, and calling it the study of fighting is like calling the Zen school the study of sitting, notwithstanding that a Zen adept can outsit most anyone. As my teacher said the day I began my training, gongfu is not the study of conflict, but of conflict resolution. At the time, he was talking about fighting efficiently, but over the years I have come to see that the study of conflict

resolution is the study of the self in the world, and that this is the study of how all things return to the one, and that this is the practice of Chan.

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The beginning of gongfu training is learning proper shapes, “shape” being a translation of the Chinese *sè*, which can also mean “color” or “form.” It’s a word that refers to the appearance of things, as in “form is precisely emptiness...,” and at this stage our form is empty indeed, for it is without power or purpose. Yet even on this rudimentary level, on the first day, in the first movement, we immediately encounter resistance. We want to do the movement, we have paid good money to learn it, we admire the way the teacher does it and want to be like him, and yet we cannot do it. We may be strong enough and flexible enough and, in fact, have no physical limitation that prevents our doing it, yet we still cannot do it. The movement seems simple enough, and in fact, though we don’t know this yet, it is simpler, more natural, and in every way easier than the tortured movements we are coming up with in trying, and failing, to do it.

Every gongfu student has this experience, not once, but over and over again, every time a new skill is introduced, and though frustrating, it is important because it demonstrates that we, ourselves, are the only things standing between us and progress. The self is clever, of course, and may miss this point. We commonly accuse the movement of being inherently awkward or difficult, but the movement is not inherently anything—it is empty, and whatever awkwardness or difficulty we experience belongs to us, not to it.

To illustrate—balance on one foot. Can you do it? For how long? Clearly, when you lose your balance it is because you, acting entirely on your own, have moved your weight off of your standing foot, so “learning to balance” is not so much learning to *do* anything as it is learning to *stop* knocking yourself over.

Try again, and this time don’t try to “hold” your balance by keeping still, rather, allow yourself to move naturally. Easier, right? This movement is you adapting to conditions, continuously resolving conflict between your desire to stand up and gravity’s pushing you down, and you’re already good at it. (After all, we were designed to live with gravity.) You may discover that actual stillness is impossible-- freeze and you fall immediately.

Now, stand on one foot and look around at your environment. For most people, this will be suddenly quite difficult, but you know how to stand and you know how to look, so what’s the problem?

Probably the best-known martial advice in history is Sun-Tzu’s, “Know self, know the opponent, 100 battles, 100 victories.” It is usually understood strategically, as being about troop strength and disposition, but I think it is about just this, the problem of awareness. When we look out at the environment, do we lose awareness of ourselves? When we monitor our balance, do we forget the outside world? Can we be as intimate with what’s “out there” as with what’s “in here”, equanimously aware of self and other, and if we can, how much difference remains between them?

One more step. Stand on one foot while I come over and try to knock you down. Now you must respond to forces you do not control and cannot predict, just as in life. Once we add the opponent, the problem becomes terribly complex, with causes and conditions in constant flux, but if you’ve done your training, you already have the tools you need to solve it. Just as quiet sitting teaches us to practice Chan in the busy intersection, studying movement teaches us to drop resistance and resolve conflict, and we can apply that experience to the opponent.

I find the symmetry of this formulation very pleasing; I also know how difficult it is to achieve.

Everyone's first response to force is to resist it, and even after the uselessness of resistance is clearly demonstrated, the instinct to resist resists being changed. Resistance seems to behave like a defending army—when I put down resistance in one place it retreats, takes up another position, and makes another stand. Why am I so stubborn? What am I defending?

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Here I am 25 years later with essentially the same question I had as a young actor, and I have probably never been closer to the answer than I was in the dentist's chair at the age of ten. When I resist anything, it emphasizes the difference between me and it, thereby intensifying sensation, therefore sharpening perception, thus motivating volition, and all to fortify consciousness.\* Resistance is the force that defends selfhood by keeping things separate and distinct, and the paradox in the practice of martial art is that we learn self-defense for the ultimate purpose of putting it down.

We have a game in Wu Mei training called “sensitive hand” which we use to teach cooperation with an opponent. Two players touch arms and follow each other through a simple movement pattern that becomes the basis for attack and defense. The mechanics can be taught in a couple of minutes, but true cooperation takes many years and involves much of what we associate with Chan practice. It requires a mindfulness that is continuous in both time and space, inclusive of all of the self and all of the opponent, which admits no wandering thoughts and permits no distinctions to arise, out of which comes a continuous flow of purposeful action that constantly adapts to the constantly changing conditions. My first glimpse of this kind of action was quite surprising. I was working with a fellow student with whom I trained often but whom I didn't know well outside of class. We played continuously for longer than usual and got into a kind of groove, where movement seemed effortless and there was no sense of leader and follower. We both lost interest in dominating the other and both found a certain delight in how our simultaneity could surprise us. But the equilibrium was a delicate one, and finally one of us lost concentration and the system broke down.

In that moment, as we uncrossed our hands, our eyes met, and even as we acknowledged our experience, we found ourselves suddenly too intimate, and unable to understand how we had become so close, we both allowed all the resistance we had dropped during the exercise to rush back into place, and we withdrew, embarrassed, from the field.

*\*The Five Skandhas—form, sensation, perception, volition, and consciousness—are, in Buddhism, the components of the illusion of self.*