

THE BEST SWORD

NEVER LEAVES THE SCABBARD

GAURI CHOPRA



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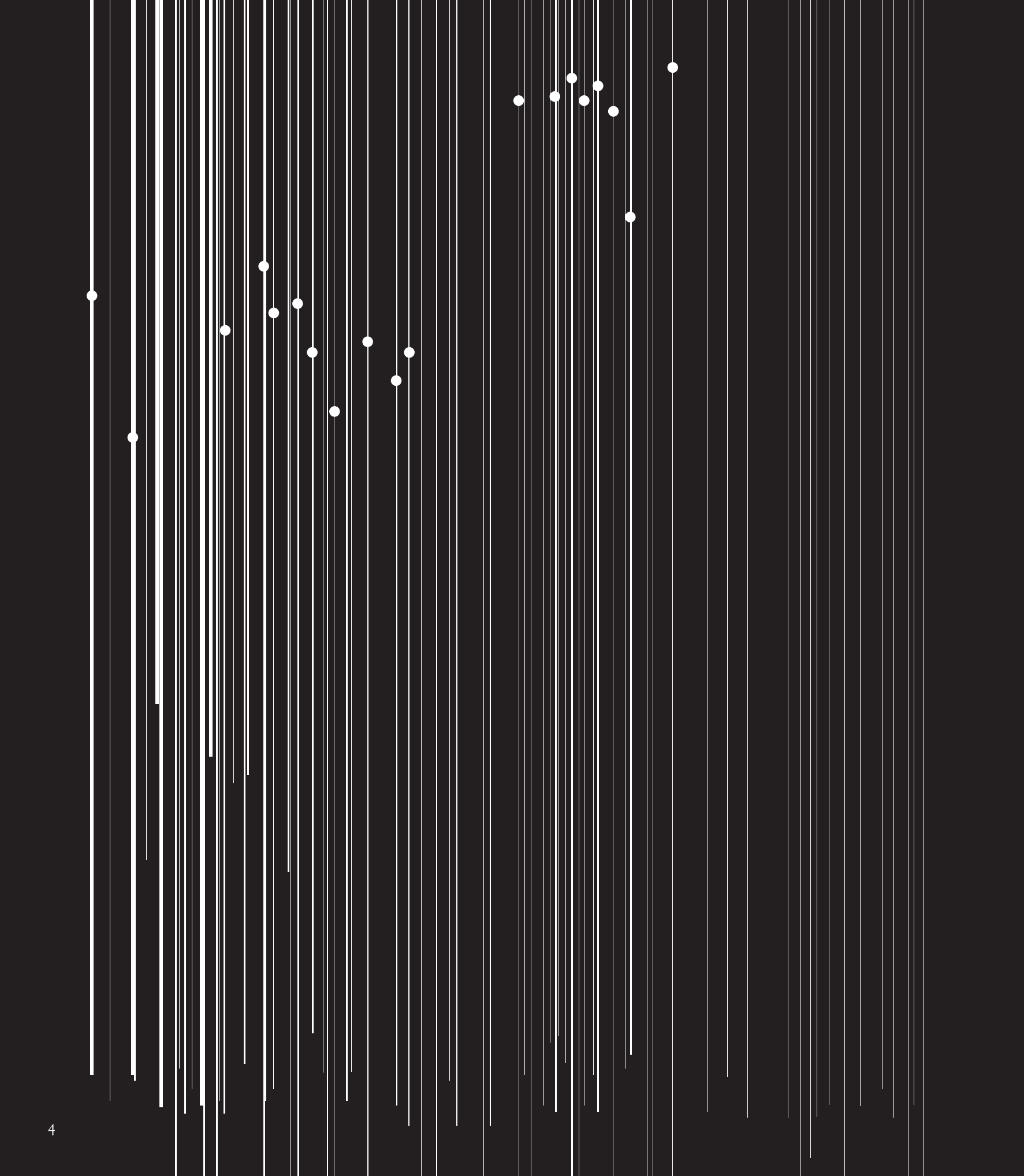
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Author's Note 8

Inspiration 16

Miyamoto Musashi

Aikido 27

The Art of Peace

Kobudo 49

The Ancient Weaponry

Karate 85

The Art of Empty Hands

Kalarippayattu 102

A Unique Martial Art

Tai Chi 113

The Softest Martial Art

Kung Fu 126

The Lifestyle Art

ZaZen 136

The Art of Seated Meditation

Mehul Vora 149

My Sensei

Bibliography 150

Credits 151

This book explores various nuances of seven selected martial art forms by tracing their history and technique through a series of photographs accompanied with some lucid explanation. It reveals the grace and philosophy beneath each form, starting from the fluid Tai Chi to the more intricate Aikido.

All martial arts emphasize the sharpening of the mind and communion with one's spirit or soul. The "Way of the Sword" goes beyond merely wielding weapons. It is more about perfecting the sword of one's spirit.

Most martial art forms which we know of today originated either in Japan, more specifically in the Okinawa District, or in China, and were all deeply influenced by Buddhism. Buddhist philosophy left its imprint on every aspect of Japanese and Chinese life, including warfare. Facets of Zen are evident everywhere in the fabric of Japanese culture. There is grace and beauty, respect and compassion, and most importantly, emphasis on the building of physical and mental strength in every martial art. All martial arts essentially profess peace. A true follower of the "Way of the Sword" is first and foremost a compassionate being. It is his prime interest to resolve a fight without having to injure his attacker in any way. He has to be exceptionally calm in a violent situation in order to not draw his sword. It is only a highly controlled mind that can succeed in this endeavor. Hence, the best sword is the one that never leaves the scabbard.



Those who are skilled in combat
do not become angered.
Those who are skilled at winning
do not become afraid.
Thus the wise win before the fight
while the ignorant fight to win.
— *Miyamoto Musashi*



TO MY FAMILY, MY INSPIRATION AND FOR MEHUL, MY MASTER.

Sensei Mehul Vora evaluates his student Gauri Chopra's work on this book as follows:

"This book is one of its kind. It is an exceptional effort by real life martial artists to reveal the truth about martial arts. Martial arts will be seen in a different light. Gauri Chopra was one of my first female students and the only woman in my dojo and perhaps in India who has practiced many martial art forms. Her interest in martial arts was solely for fitness and harnessing her mind and not for acquiring belts or adding qualifications to her name. I have given her the title of 'Uchi Deshi,' which means Personal Student, a prestigious honor. When she came with the concept of Best Swords I was unsure of what she had in mind. Gradually after a couple of meetings I realized that the book was not a technical book at all; instead, it was all about the subtle yet infinitely more important aspects of martial arts. It is truly something unprecedented. No book in my collection comes close in comparison. What impressed me the most was the way in which she interpreted the art form. She understood that the mind controls the body. I am proud of my student's effort".

*Achieving ultimate balance
is about making up your mind.*

*Making up your mind
is a matter of balancing all within.*

*Perceiving good
is a matter of understanding evil.*

*Where both coexist,
it is a matter of identifying the colors;*

*Colors so many,
so difficult to distinguish.*

*We perceive life through our five senses,
but can we truly trust them?*

*A mindless mind for a warrior,
a swordless warrior to win a war;*

*such is the perception of a martial mind.
— Amar Sagar*



Though there are many paths at the foot of the mountain, all those who reach the peak see the same Moon.

— *O Sensei*

There are many reasons for studying martial arts. Be it self defense, physical fitness, or spiritual growth, it varies from person to person and depends entirely on the individual's ability to extract from his learning. Towards the end, the student and the master arrive on a common curve: a peaceful mind and a healthy body.

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GAURI CHOPRA

Miyamoto Musashi

The Way of the warrior does not include other ways . . . but if you know the Way broadly you will see it in everything.

— *Miyamoto Musashi*

Miyamoto Musashi (1584-1645) was one of the greatest Japanese warriors of his time. A Samurai without a master, he created history in the late sixteenth century by fighting his first duel at the age of 13. Later on, he started a school based on the science of martial arts and called it the “Two Skies,” literally meaning two swords in the hands of one. His teachings were based on the science of warfare, but also emphasized mastery over different facets of life such as writing, painting, and mundane everyday tasks such as drinking tea. For Musashi martial arts were more than mere military training – they were a way of life. His valuable insights were relevant to ordinary men and bureaucrats alike. People adhered to his guidance and followed his teachings wherever he went.

Between the ages of 13 and 20, Musashi traveled from province to province in Japan fighting Samurais of various levels without losing a single duel. Coming heavily under the influence of Zen Buddhism after he turned 30, Musashi realized that no weapon was as potent as the human mind. He had discovered the secret to fighting the war within and soon relinquished his sword as a weapon of attack. Henceforth, he only fought for self-defense and to protect others.

His metamorphosis from a harsh warrior to a peaceful, spiritual being was an intriguing aspect of his life, for in the years to come Musashi applied his sharp insight to writing, poetry, painting, and sculpture, among other arts. In his old age Musashi lived a fulfilled life dotted with artistic creations. He is specifically noted for producing recognized masterpieces of calligraphy and classic ink painting that have left deep impressions on his students and disciples, even today. He believed that, “The Way of the warrior does not include other ways . . . but if you know the Way broadly you will see it in everything”. In *Go Rin No Sho*, Musashi’s classic treatise on military strategy, he writes, “When I apply the principle of strategy to the ways of different arts and crafts, I no longer have need for a teacher in any domain”.

Merged into the tree, Musashi almost looks like a branch or simply a part of this tree. He is one with his surroundings and hence has achieved Ultimate Balance.



Why should we adapt the qualities of water?

In our daily lives every human being confronts a range of obstacles that obstruct clear thinking. Lack of solutions to every-day problems can overwhelm us. And while our mind may be distracted by a multitude of thoughts, the most important element is balance, which, if maintained, can foil the mental attack successfully. This philosophy is true in the practice of martial arts as well where every fight is unique and every attack has an equal and opposite defense mechanism.

The practice of any forms of martial art requires one's mind to flow like water. In every attack the martial artist needs to be aware of his surrounding and have an "empty mind" where there are no thoughts and no fears; only a clear and sharp presence. To achieve this state, one has to adapt and practice the qualities of water.

Water flows no matter what obstacles it faces. Martial arts are about presence of mind, which can only be achieved if we overcome our fears and obstacles and let our mind flow as freely as water.

Water aligns itself to its immediate environment and finds its own level. In martial arts, as every move can be surprising one has to align themselves to their surroundings in order to mount a retaliatory attack.

Water maintains its identity under the most varied circumstances. In martial arts, irrespective of the situation and the number of enemies one confronts, if they can maintain their identity, which is a strong, clear, and calm mind, victory will beckon.



The sword has to be more than a simple weapon; it has to be the answers to life's questions.

— *Miyamoto Musashi*





In 1920, in the middle of the battlefield an unarmed Morihei defeated a naval officer who was a brilliant swordsman, avoiding all his thrusts skillfully. After the battle he stepped into his garden and suddenly the earth started trembling. A deep realization dawned on him, as he experienced his first vision.

He stated, “The earth trembled and golden vapor walled up from the ground, engulfing me. All at once I understood the nature of creation. The way of the warrior is to manifest Divine Love, a spirit that embraces and nurtures all things. I saw the entire earth as my home and the sun, moon and stars as my intimate friends. All attachment to material things vanished”.



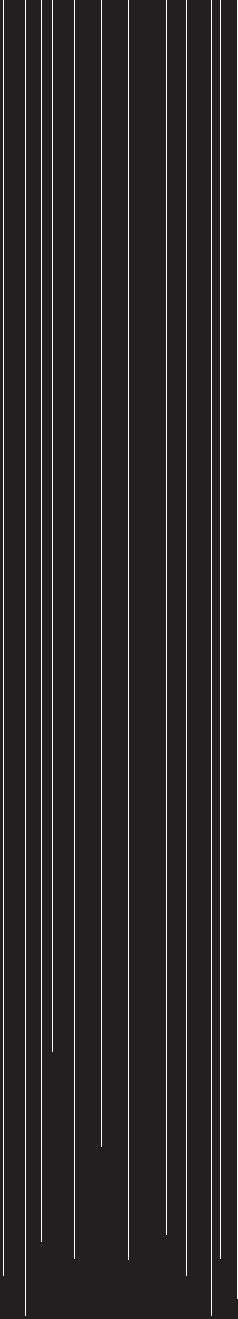
Ki

Kaiso deshi

Since it is one of the more spiritual forms of martial arts, Aikido makes extensive use of the concept of Ki. Ki is often translated as “life force” or “energy flow” and is the central principle that governs the universe and the individual – “The Cosmic Truth”. Ki can be experienced and perceived through physical appearances, behavior, and body language. Many maintain that it is a “force of energy that helps them attain good posture and a stable mind”. Despite these different interpretations of Ki, its core essence is firmly rooted in Aikido

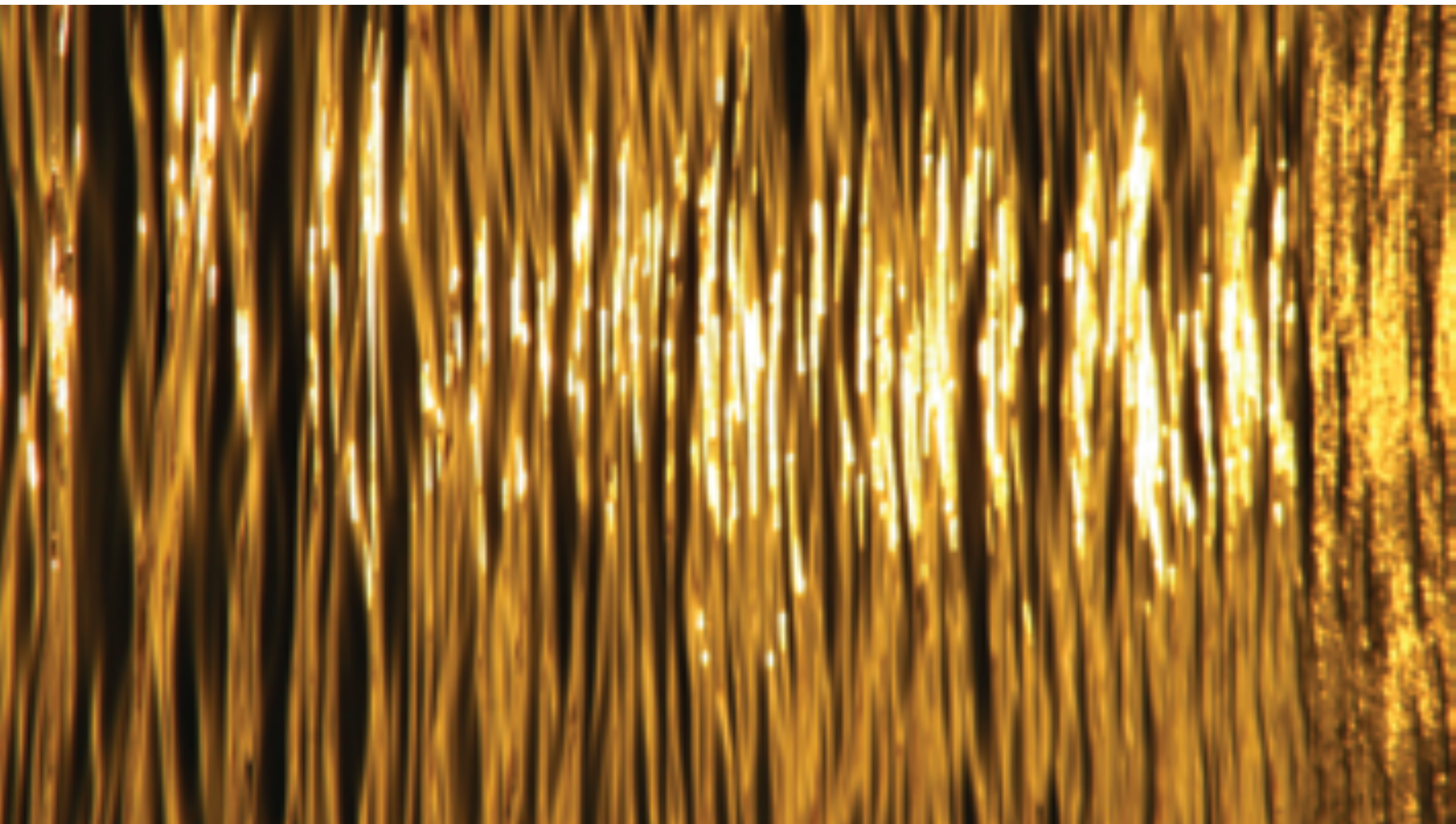
I have practiced Aikido for two years with my Sensei, Mehul Vora. Besides attaining a high level of fitness, the spiritual experience has changed my life. I have achieved a sense of focus by subconsciously concentrating during every little action, including mundane daily activities such as eating, running, and bathing. Eating has become a pleasure, as I can feast my taste buds on anything that is put on my plate. I can now complete projects in less than half the time, as compared to my pre-Aikido days. My conscience feels alive and vibrant. My mind has started flowing like a river without any rude interruptions. Even though I am versatile with other martial art forms, this is my first step toward controlling the mind. At every stage I can sense that I am harnessing the Ki and feel an energy level like never before.





*Flow with whatever may happen and
let your mind be free. Stay centered by
accepting whatever you are doing.
This is the ultimate.
– Chauang Tzu*

Overleaf: An early morning on the river Ganges in the northern Indian town of Haridwar expressing the “mind like water ability” that every being possesses. The water looks as though it is weaving a fabric called “Flow”.



Move Off Line

Many spiritual masters have pointed out, “absence of body is better than presence of mind”.

Usually, energy flows from the attacker to his intended victim. In simple words, energy flows from one point to another. The line that connects these two points is called the line of attack.

Once a martial artist leaves the ground with a flying kick or a punch, there is very little one can do to change the course of attack. One can only move away from the line of attack. Presence of mind is the key to performing this move, which comes from patience and foresight.





I know perfection is unattainable but still, let us try to achieve it.
– *Sensei Mehul Vora*



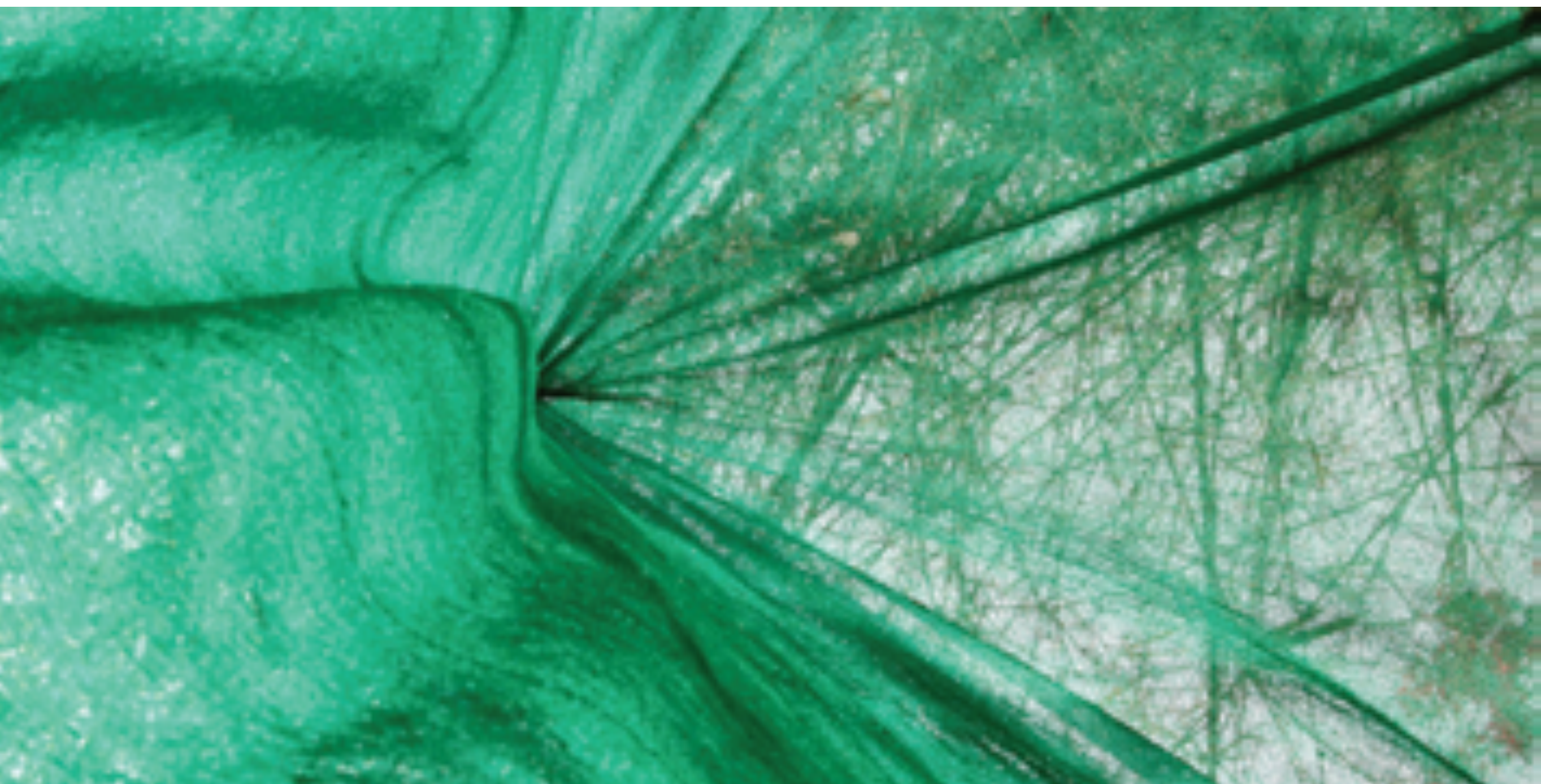
Mind the Net

A successful fisherman is the one who waits and attains absolute stillness in the atmosphere and within him before casting his net. It is the state of oneness of being.

— *Anand Sagar*

My father would speak about this philosophy, which at first was very difficult to understand, but with time and practice in martial art I gradually found its true meaning.

The mind is a net that is constantly clogged by involuntary and often intrusive thoughts. When you are able to consciously transcend this maze of thoughts, or the net, you reach a space called “No Mind” in which you can control every action. This net is omnipresent, but the key is to understand and overcome it so that we can attain stillness in whatever we do.





The literal meaning of the two Japanese characters that make up the word karate is “empty hands”.

Karate originated in Okinawa, an island between China and Mainland Japan, in the fifteenth century when it was brought over by Chinese trading families. The art was originally known as Te or Okinawa-te, which means “Okinawa Hand.” In some regions it is also called the Chinese Hand, as it was greatly influenced by Chinese martial art. Karate was practiced by the Okinawa nobility and was popular within the royal family. The teachings of Karate were summed in to patterns of movement known as Kata. Each Kata contained a complete catalogue of fighting techniques for kicking, punching, stamping, locking, throwing, and grappling. When Karate was introduced in Japan it acquired the Japanese Budo culture where the person practicing karate wore a white uniform with colored belts.

When the mind is distracted, stray thoughts distort judgment of the opponent's movement. Without clarity it is almost impossible to gauge the attack and defend yourself. Similarly, in our daily affairs anger warps some of our interactions with one another because we choose to react with an unstable mind. But the one who maintains a stable mind is indeed calm and almost always finds a peaceful way to end the dispute.

A distorted mind gives way to garbled thoughts and creates momentary ripples.

A distorted mind gives way to many thoughts and creates momentary ripples.





In Tai chi, “Push Hands” is an exercise performed by two people who are attempting to improve their skills. To be balanced and relaxed while in contact with another person who is moving is a difficult task. Push Hands provides Tai Chi practitioners with a format to test and improve upon their flexibility, timing, balance, poise, and numerous other qualities while in contact with another person. Push Hands also provides a gentle way to “compete” with other Tai Chi practitioners without the risk of injury. Tai Chi enables a practitioner to channel potentially destructive energy, in the form of a kick or punch, in a direction where it is no longer dangerous.



Tao philosophy advocates that the universe is composed of two opposing but complementary forces – the Yin and Yang. Yin is passive and therefore empty, cold, still, and negative, whereas the Yang is active and is full, hot, moving, and positive. Yin and Yang are continuously interacting with each other bringing about a fine balance that is omnipresent throughout the universe. When the Yin and the Yang are in perfect sync, a state of dynamic equilibrium is achieved. This is called “Tai Chi”. The Tai Chi symbol shows Yin and Yang united in the circle of infinity.

During my Tai Chi lessons with Sifu Rakesh Menon in the open parks of Mumbai, I experienced meditation in motion where my body felt featherweight and all ambient sounds vanished. I experienced unity with nature and felt the harmonious energy flow through my being.(There is a little more to this feeling than just a mention of unity).

An abstract of the Yin and Yang in the universe – a depiction of the hard and the soft creating a perfect balance.

Photograph: Sensei Mehul Vora's eye with the reflection of a sword.



After Bodhidharma's epic trek across the Himalayas from India to China, he arrived at the Song Shan Shaolin monastery in the province of Hunan. There he introduced a form of art designed to enhance meditation techniques practiced by the monks.

Upon gaining entrance to Shaolin, Ta Mo realized that the Buddhist monks were weak and unable to perform the rigorous duties that were expected of them. During meditation they often fell asleep or were extremely restless and failed to achieve inner peace. To remedy these failings, Ta Mo imparted new knowledge about breathing techniques and meditation as practiced in Yoga, and enhanced the performance of the Chinese Buddhist monks by adding a much-needed spiritual dimension. Ta Mo also created three treatises of exercises – the Muscle Change Classic, the Marrow washing, and the Eighteen Hand Lohan Shou (Lohan means enlightened and Shou means hands or exercises) that marked the beginnings of Shaolin Kung Fu.

The Muscle Change Classic procedure consists of exercises that combine with breathing techniques and concentration to boost physical health.

The Eighteen Hand Lohan Shou, also known as Luohan Qigong or Lohan Chi Kung, is designed to improve one's fitness, concentration, and poise through a system of exercises and breath control.

In the subsequent centuries, Shaolin martial artists modified the various styles to suit their needs. Despite the presence of numerous styles, Shaolin Masters created order in an extremely intelligent way. They reviewed all the forms and tried to incorporate this in to one ultimate style. Years of work lead them to conclude that it was not possible for one style to suit everyone every time for every reason. Therefore, a multifaceted style was required and so using the combined knowledge of all styles they organized these techniques into the Five Animals Style: the Tiger, the Crane, the Leopard, the Snake, and the Dragon. The five forms of animal style were chosen for their ability to train the strength, speed, skill, energy, and spirit of the martial artist.



The way of the sword and the way of Zen are identical, for they have the same purpose — that of killing the ego.

— *Yamada Jirokichi*





The martial mind never arrives anywhere; it is forever on an endless journey.





Mehul Vora

“I feel that martial art is a living thing, and it is alive to a great extent in all its practitioners. I practice with one sole aim, that is, my art should give all its students a healthy and long life. A true traveler has no fixed destination and no intention of arriving. I am an eternal student of the martial arts and always will be and I want to promote it in its purest form”.

A student of many masters and a master of many students, Mehul Vora has given Indian Karate an international dimension. At the young age of 27, he has become a martial arts phenomenon. He has trained in Karate, Judo, Jujitsu, Aikido, Aiki-jujitsu, Judo, Iaido, and Kobudo, as well as in European forms such as wrestling, boxing, kickboxing, and Krav Maga.

Sensei Mehul Vora started his initial training at the early age of 3. He was awarded a first-degree black belt in Japanese International Gojuryu after 11 years of grueling training at the age of 14. His career followed a steady upward curve, as he gained a second and third degree black belt from the Okinawa Gojuryu Karate-do Kenpo Seibukan, India, and a fourth and fifth degree black belt by Nekodo Gojuryu Karate-do International, USA. Additionally, he is the only Indian to be awarded the honor of the Katana (sword) by the 16th generation Grandmaster of Mugairyu Shihan Kazo Inoue. He was the youngest person to ever head an international karate organization, the Sekai Seito Gojuryu Karate-Do Kyokai, as president and is the sole representative of that organization in India. He had the honor of training under many senior international masters such as Dr. Jose Miguel Gallego, tenth degree black belt, Shihan Hirano Osamu, eighth degree black belt, and Shihan Kazu Inoue, eighth degree black belt, to name a few. Sensei Mehul Vora has traveled extensively around the world for training and coaching purposes spreading the gospel of the martial arts. He is the only teacher licensed Indian teacher of Mugairyu Iai Heido Nichiryu Kai, the Japanese art of swordsmanship. He is the direct student of Shihan Kazu Inoue, the sixteenth generation head of Mugairyu in the world. In addition to being a fourth degree black belt in Japanese Karate and a sixth degree black belt in American Karate, he holds a first degree black belt in Judo and first degree black belt in Kobudo weapons. He is a life member of the prestigious United States Martial Arts Association, is a pioneer of Women's Kickboxing in India, and the President of the Maharashtra Professional Kickboxing Association. In addition, he has trained several national and international champions. He was the national champion of India in 1994 and 1995 in 'Kata Forms' and 'Kumite Sparring'.

In 1998, he was awarded the Best Martial Arts Instructor of the Year by then Deputy Commissioner of Mumbai police, Dr. I. P. Kalpatri. Sensei Mehul Vora heads an organization called Nippon Budo Sogo International, India, which is one of the largest martial arts organization in the country with over 16 centers in Mumbai city itself, and over 15,000 students enrolled in the training of martial arts. This organization is the only one to offer coaching in multiple arts such as Gojuryu, Iaido, Judo, Kendo, Jujitsu, Kobudo, kickboxing, and Yoga at the same time.

