

## **Martial Arts: My Path to Nam**

Written by: Sabom Brian Hammer as told by Grandmaster Kim Soo

*You must dig in one place in order to discover water.*

Many times I heard these words in my youth. As a junior high school student in 1951, I was shy and lacked life direction. At that time in my life, my role model was my mother. She was not a well-educated woman. She came from a poor but noble family and she had a difficult life in some ways. Yet, she always believed in me and inspired me. She taught me to dream and have ambition.

My mother recognized my lack of confidence and encouraged me to study martial arts. In 1951, during the height of the Korean War, I was in 5<sup>th</sup> grade. My mother arranged for a neighbor to teach me martial arts. Attracted to what I was learning, in 1952, I enrolled at a Kong Soo Do school in Seoul. On several occasions over the first few years of my training, however, I became bored, experienced setbacks, and was frustrated. I wanted to quit. My mother often used these words to inspire me to keep training.

As I see it now, the water she was referring to was my authentic self. Seeing that I lacked confidence, my mother told me that I could be anything I wanted to be. She told me that everyone has a mission in life, and that I must dig deep inside of myself in order to discover my purpose. This is what she meant by digging in one place to discover water. I remember one day she gave me a blank piece of paper and told me to draw whatever I wanted to be. To this day, I am drawing that picture. Martial arts became my compass—orienting me toward the life of my dreams. I am still digging. And I am living the life of my dreams. My passion and my path are to teach martial arts, and offer to others the gifts I received from my training.

Over the course of my 53 years of martial art practice and teaching, I have thought a great deal about, and have developed, a system of martial arts practice that anyone can study at any time in their life. Chayon Ryu is Sang Hwal Mu Do - a lifestyle martial art. Chayon Ryu is designed for those who wish to remain committed to the path of martial arts and its many benefits, including self-realization.

Consistent, committed martial arts training, whether one is sixteen or sixty years of age, will benefit one physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. The longer one trains, the deeper the benefits. Committed martial artists will develop greater balance and control, a sharper and clearer mind, a more generous and loving heart, an authentic experience, and an expression of one's true self: the self beyond fear and self-judgment.

I teach martial arts because I believe in individual freedom. Everyone should control his or her own life, and enjoy the confidence and passion of the power to be able to live the life of their dreams. Training in martial arts is a path to freedom. *The ultimate treasure that long-term or "right" practice offers is a path to liberate the confident, powerful being that one is at the core, but perhaps has lost touch with along the way.*

Most people are limited in self-confidence and power because they see themselves as victim to enemies outside of themselves. What I mean by this is that many feel that the world does not seem to be cooperating with their dreams. They feel unlucky, not smart or young enough, or otherwise hindered by people and situations that are keeping them down. It is my belief, however, that these "outside enemies" are merely a reflection of the "inside enemies." What people perceive as limitations outside of themselves are generally mirrors of something going on inside of themselves. These inner obstacles most often fall into the categories of negative self-talk, self-judgments, and irrationally held, limiting beliefs about themselves and the world. From this perspective, it is the inner victory over the internal enemies that sets people free.

For me then, the true aim of martial arts practice is not to learn how to kick and punch, or defeat the external enemy. Rather, practicing consistent "right" practice with humility and patience allows one to follow a natural path that will defeat the internal enemies that exist in one's mind. This is what I mean when I tell students during form practice to set up internal enemies in their minds, and then knock them down or destroy them. Consistently and over time, "right" practice of the martial arts will begin to free students from the shackles of fear and self-doubt. With continued practice, students develop the confidence, willpower, and creativity to take the necessary steps and live the lives of their dreams. Commitment to "right" practice is all that is required.

Consistent martial arts practice, then, renders much more than physical fitness, self-defense and mental discipline. One making a commitment to "natural way" practice follows a path of freedom toward enlightenment, or "nam."

## What is “Nam”?

Over the past 40 years in the west, there has been a lot of talk about enlightenment or “nam.” There has also been a lot of misunderstanding. Enlightenment is often presented as available exclusively to the very few who meditate for hours each day and renounce worldly pleasures. This is not my belief. My understanding is that enlightenment is, in varying degrees, for everyone.

My belief is that we are all already enlightened beings. This is the nature of our souls. Yet we are souls having a human experience, and the human part has forgotten that we are enlightened. Although we are presented with many tools that enhance our enlightenment, we do not always recognize their importance. It is like picking up a small bolt from the road, then putting it in a pocket and forgetting it is there. Then, at a later time when we need a bolt, we remember that we have it and can put it to use. There are many ideas that we are exposed to, yet put away to the back of our consciousness. Then, when we come across a new problem, we discover that we already have the tools we need to solve the problem.

Enlightenment, then, is realizing the true nature of what we have. It is simply seeing more clearly the true nature of things. My greatest wish is for my students to recognize this truth, and live the lives of their dreams. I want my students to be enlightened.

I believe all of us are born geniuses. Within a few years of birth, we are able to grow into walking and talking beings, mastering and deciphering a language that allows us to communicate our needs and feelings. We learn to play sports, create art, fall in love, invent things and ask questions. All of these are amazing feats.

Yet, most of us learn to identify ourselves with what we cannot do, and we lose sight of our genius. We see others who are better than us at drawing and we conclude that we are not creative. Another does better than us at math and we conclude that we are not smart. A third has a better basic form number one, and we conclude that we are average martial artists. We come to judge ourselves as not smart enough, creative enough, talented enough, not as coordinated, worthy, lovable: simply, not *enough*. It is these judgments, delusions, and irrational beliefs that block our natural state of enlightenment.

How then does enlightenment come? The true path of enlightenment requires a commitment, with humility and patience, to a single practice. Modern culture is filled with promises for instant happiness and get-rich-quick schemes. All of these pursuits, in my opinion, lead us in exactly the wrong direction. As my mother said, you must dig in one place in order to discover water. Enlightenment simply requires long-standing dedication to this path. It is a lifelong journey. One must take the journey with an open mind and with an attitude of humility, not with a specific achievement in mind, such as becoming a black belt. The Chinese refer to this as “tao” and the Japanese and Koreans refer to it as “do.”

Already we are more empowered to live our lives in alignment with our heart, gut and soul. And as long as we stay committed to our practice, we will naturally gain luminosity and brilliance as we reach higher degrees of nam. According to mystical understanding from eastern and western tradition, this path continues toward the ultimate revelation of our authentic selves. Complete enlightenment is often called Buddha or Christ consciousness. Few ever reach this ultimate nam. I have not attained this stage and cannot, therefore, say much about it. In Korean martial arts, this stage is referred to as “do sa.” This is the level of sainthood.

## The Three Stages on the Path to Nam:

There are three stages of practice that lead to increasing degrees of enlightenment.

The first stage is practice. Whatever the discipline, in order to advance, there must be consistent practice. Many do not get very far and quit when their practice gets boring and their wandering minds seek new thrills and immediate gratifications. Yet, as described by the Aikido master and teacher, George Leonard in his book Mastery [Plume 1992], the path (what Leonard calls the “Mastery Curve”) is dominated by plateaus during which growth seems stagnant. He encourages us to remain committed to our practice during these times of stagnation because a growth spurt will soon come. Attaining mastery is learning to love the plateaus and the practice itself. I agree, for with consistent “right” practice, the growth spurts are inevitable. Each plateau allows us to perfect our knowledge and prepares us to be ready for the growth spurts.

The second stage requires study. After consistent years of practice under good teaching, the student must look for and discover the principles that underlie his chosen art or discipline. This is a philosophical phase, which leads to a deeper understanding of the art or discipline.

The third stage emphasizes “right” practice, and is critical for healthy advancement along the path of mastery and enlightenment. This stage involves discrimination, in that the student realizes that the principles of his chosen practice are universal principles that he or she must apply to all aspects of his life. For example, balance of movement, rhythm, and proper breathing are critical to healthy, powerful martial arts practice. These same principles, however, also apply to business negotiations and child rearing. During this stage, the practitioner begins to integrate the physical and mental with the emotional and spiritual. This, in my opinion, is a significant step on the path of nam.

I came to the United States in order to teach martial arts at the third stage to Americans. As a writer for *Black Belt Magazine* in the late 1960’s, I came to recognize that most American martial arts instructors at that time lacked the training and understanding to teach “right” practice discrimination. Instead they were focused on kicking, punching and tournament sparring, with the goal to win trophies. This is low-level martial arts practice that does not lead to enlightenment, but instead results in injury, quitting, and cancer of the mind. I came to the United States to teach martial arts with the focus on the third stage, and to preserve the purity of the arts that had evolved over thousands of years as a path to nam.

#### My Path to Nam:

My first glimpse of nam came to me after approximately ten years of consistent martial arts practice. It came unexpectedly.

In 1953, I first studied Tang Mu Kwan under a 7<sup>th</sup> Dan instructor by the name of Yu Ki Joon. Yu Ki Joon was a mean Korean marine who carried a big stick and commanded respect through intimidation. He was the first person who taught me Basic Form number one.

Some of what he taught me ultimately became the basis for my first glimpse of enlightenment as a martial artist. On turns, for example, he taught me to move my foot first, and then to follow with the upper-body turn and block. All the martial artists in Korea turned this way back in the 1950’s and 1960’s. I turned this way for over 10 years, never questioning this approach to turning.

Much later in my practice, when I was a 4<sup>th</sup> Dan, I read a book titled “Practical Karate” by Nakayama Masatoshi, a well-known master of Shotokan Karate. I read a statement in this book that all karate movement must be “one-unit motion.” This was a bold statement, “all karate movement must be one-unit motion.” Karate is not a style, it is a word that encompasses all martial art styles; and according to Nakayama, all styles must incorporate one-unit motion.

When I read this statement, I was able to connect the importance of this principal to what I had learned in the martial arts. Through study, I discovered my first martial arts principle. This principle began a process for me in which I questioned every aspect of my martial arts’ practice. I no longer accepted anything I had learned. I questioned and looked for deeper truths or principles. This, for me, began my path of “right” practice. I began diligent and focused effort to discover other martial art principles, and, in addition, principles of life. This was my study in discrimination. I did this because I saw that practicing martial arts without an understanding of basic principles was causing injury and other physical problems to most students. Many quit after some years of practice because of injury; derailing their path to nam.

I started the Chayon Ryu martial arts system as a third stage martial arts practice. I have subsequently built the system based upon the principles that I have gathered since the moment I read that statement in Mr. Nakayama’s book. My hope is that teaching these principles with this discrimination will serve future martial artists in two ways: first, by giving students the ability to practice martial arts in alignment with the fundamental principles, thereby avoiding injury and allowing any student to enjoy martial arts practice for as long as they desire; second, I hope to give my students an advantage on the path to nam by teaching the fundamental principles or “right” practice.

#### “Right” Practice – Humility:

Humility is critical in order to achieve enlightenment. Humility means “humbleness of mind; lack of pride” [The World Book Encyclopedia Dictionary, 1963]. To practice with humility is to let go of our mistaken self-identifications as “worse than,” “not enough,” “special,” or “better than” anyone else. Humility is recognizing the openhearted, perfect beings that we naturally are. However, it is easier said than done, and cultivating this perspective is a lifetime practice that is very much a part of the path to nam.

A big part of cultivating this humility is through selfless service. In the case of martial arts practice, we cultivate humility and kong through service to the dojang and system. But a word of caution: “don’t do it for me!” Students sometimes clean or improve the dojang in some helpful manner, and then let me know in some subtle or direct way

that they did this for me. Another student told me that he wanted to write something for me. Again, “don’t do it for me!” If you think that by cleaning the dojang, mowing the lawn or writing an article, you are going to gain a special status with me, you are taking action for exactly the wrong reason. You are actually taking a step away from humility and enlightenment. I see this as trying to be “special,” and this is cultivating the falsity that prevents us from attaining our natural state of freedom.

Furthermore, I will not be obliged to you for cleaning the dojang, and I will not give you special status. I don’t teach for myself, I teach for the benefit of others. As I stated earlier, I do reap kong benefits from teaching, but this is incidental and I am convinced that those who act in order to reap personal benefit, do not build kong. Kong is a bi-product of service. Mother Teresa did not become a saint because she figured that feeding the hungry was the best path to sainthood. Her mission was simply to feed the hungry – her path was one of service. So when you do something in your school, do it for the school, do it for the system, don’t do it for me. This is basic humility, and an essential ingredient for enlightenment. Again, we are all special, but never because we think we are special. Humility means letting go of the *thought* of being special, and surrendering to humility and our innate specialness.

#### “Wrong” Practice – A Word of Caution:

It is important to mention that there is a dark side to enlightenment, or what I will refer to as “Dark Power.” This battle between the light and dark is represented in mythology throughout human cultural history from the story of Adam and Eve to modern day dramas such as “Star Wars,” “The Matrix,” and The Lord of the Rings. It is important to not confuse “Dark Power” with “Enlightenment.” Anyone who practices martial arts (or any discipline) for many years will increase one’s power and insight, and have the ability to influence others. A student may be an outstanding martial artist, having studied martial arts with much diligence. The student may have even attained recognition and fame. Yet, if the student sees this power as his or her own, and is without proper guidance and discrimination, there is the likelihood that he or she will develop a cancer of the mind, or Ju Hwa Ip Ma. The student likely will see him- or herself as superior and special. One may have a gathered knowledge and superior skill, but without humility and “right” practice, what one experiences is a dead-end, ego-serving, and dangerous path. That student is not enlightened.

These are the conditions that result in cult leaders and other forms of powerful deviants. It must be understood that cult leaders generally have light and they are a force to be reckoned with. They use their light or power to exercise control and keep those who follow them dependent and confused. Many people, upon discovering a good thing want to keep it for themselves – often to gain a perceived advantage over others. Ultimately, their leadership is used for their own egos. Consequently, their followers’ potential will be limited and poisoned by the Dark Power.

This is why “right” practice and humility are critically important. Not only is enlightenment a path for one to follow, but it is also a responsibility. Followers will always be attracted to those who seek nam. Many people are unable to differentiate between those leaders who are Enlightened and those who merely have Dark Power. The difference is that enlightened leaders will teach their followers the way to independence while Dark Power leaders will keep their followers dependent and confused.

The way I see it, an individual must establish him- or herself as fully independent in order to cultivate degrees of enlightenment. My teaching method is designed to support all students in their desire to express themselves independently and to pursue their individual paths. I offer the place and a teaching method to cultivate “right” practice. Although I encourage committed practice, the rest is up to the individual. My mother did not force me continue studying martial arts; she merely believed in me and encouraged me. I hope to do the same for my students.

#### Conclusion:

For me, enlightenment is simply following the path of discovery of one’s own abilities and talents. We all have epiphanies, and they come to us after many years of consistent study of a subject. Some study music or painting, some study the art of parenting or good citizenry. My path is martial art and I am happy to share my discoveries with anyone who is serious and interested.

As a martial arts teacher today, I firmly believe that all teachers in my system should attend regular instructor’s clinics. This is why I established a permanent location to teach martial arts. I want my teachers to teach their students the most correct martial arts movements, as I understand them. This is not to say that my students and my students’ students will not have their own moments of enlightenment and take my understanding of martial arts principles to even greater levels. In fact, I want my students to do this. Yet, at the same time, I do not want my students to have to reinvent the wheel and again discover what I found ten, twenty, thirty and forty years into my practice. My hope is that my discoveries will help my students jump-start and accelerate their path to nam, shine brightness on their paths, and open the way for us all to live joy-filled, inspired, creative and powerful lives.