

A Magazine on Philosophy, Culture & Volunteering

THE ACROPOLITAN

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2020



NA
NEW ACROPOLIS

Post-lockdown
Values?

FEATURE

Living the Samurai
Myth

The Dance of Life



FROM THE EDITORIAL DESK

Dear Reader,

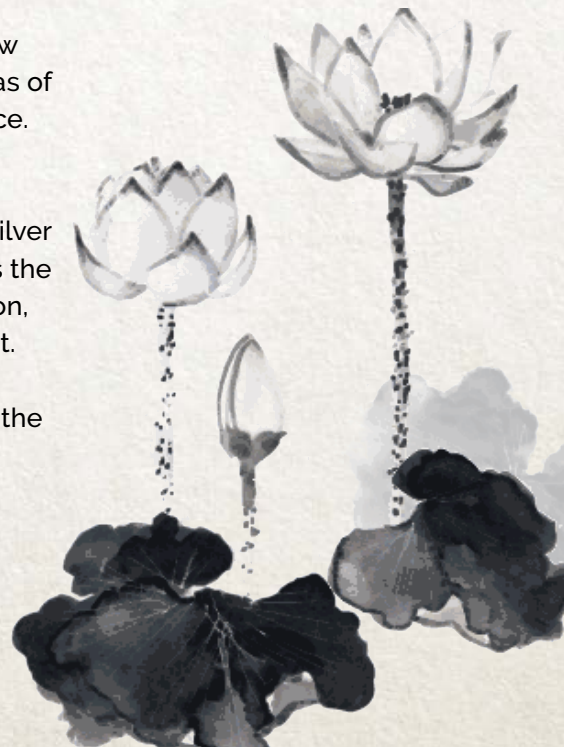
As we set off into a post-lockdown world, amidst the challenges and obstacles of the past several months, glorious tales of selfless everyday heroes have emerged across the globe, inviting us to celebrate the human spirit, the indomitable human potential to reach for goodness and altruism. These were perhaps a glimpse of a different paradigm of human civilization, rising not through legislation of economic, ecological, or policy regulations, but by reviving timeless human values, our most sacred and ancient treasure.

Let the inner dignity and courage of a Samurai Warrior become our prized armor with which to face the uncertain times which lie ahead. Grace and discipline might characterize our approach in this seemingly new dance of life. While perseverance and responsibility, as of an ecologist, might reveal the sincerity of our resilience.

As the illuminating fireflies announce the arrival of a nourishing monsoon, and the wolf's howl invites the silver light of the moon to kiss the Earth, so too perhaps it is the time for philosophers and idealists to sound the clarion, rekindling hope in the innermost recesses of the heart.

Let us dare to Discover our inner strength, Awaken to the opportunity of our times, and Transform our world.

Hariato H Mehta
Editor



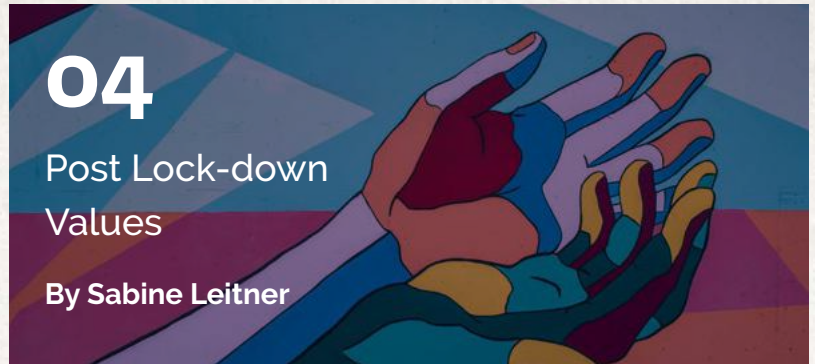
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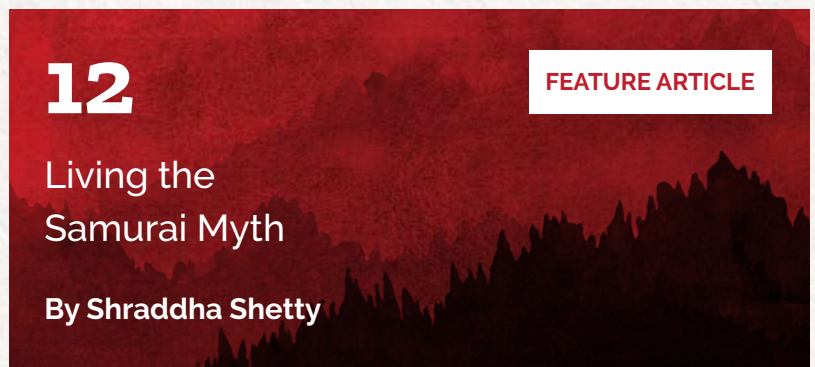
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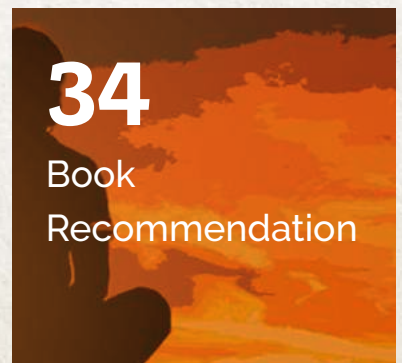
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POST-LOCKDOWN VALUES?

By Sabine Leitner

"There are decades where nothing happens – and there are weeks where decades happen."

This Lenin quote might sum up how many of us feel regarding the events of 2020. Not that nothing happened before – in my view the last few decades contained quite a lot of events on a mega scale – but the changes triggered by COVID-19 have been unprecedented. As some countries are gradually coming out of complete lockdown, the paramount question is: where do we go from here?

There are many signs that we want to hold on to the positives of the last 3 months and that we see this crisis as a transition and an opportunity to bring in systemic changes. But how can we best use this kairos moment to create a world after lockdown that is actually better than the one before?

One tried and tested way of doing this is certainly by identifying clear goals that need to be achieved in order to bring about an improvement. When Britain needed a plan to recover after World War II, the economist Sir William Beveridge identified five problems to be tackled simultaneously: want, ignorance, idleness, squalor, and disease. His report served as the basis for the post-war welfare state and guided social reform for the next 30 years. For the current crisis, the historian Peter Hennessy has proposed another five priorities: social care, social housing, technical education, climate change, and preparing for artificial intelligence.

Whilst it is absolutely clear that any of these points need to be addressed, I wonder whether concrete goals alone will be sufficient to bring about a lasting and sustainable change and improvement. I believe that we will also need to focus on values. Values are, after all, amongst the main driving forces of our actions. Of course, each concrete goal does embody a value, but values are not only broader, they are also deeper and more all-encompassing. For example, the value of 'health' can give rise to a much deeper change of how I lead my life than the concrete goal of attaining a specific weight or running several miles in a specific time or giving up alcohol. As a value, it also

How can we best use this kairos moment to create a world after lockdown that is actually better than the one before?



enables me to understand the concept of 'health' on more than just one level: not only as a specific aspect of physical health but also as mental health, emotional health and – why not? – spiritual health. It might even make me reflect on the underlying principles of health and their application on all these levels: balance, harmony, nothing in excess, etc.

I don't think that concrete goals alone will be able to create this better world. It is necessary to address our underlying belief systems and the values they are based on – let us not forget that profit is also a 'value'. If the world is, as Einstein said, a product of our thinking, then we need to change the way we think in order to produce a better one. We need a philosophical examination of the principles that help us to decide what is right and wrong, and how to act in various situations. We will also need stories and narratives that transmit them and open our hearts to them.

Values will always give rise to concrete actions. Concrete actions alone, however, will probably not in the long-term awaken and transmit values that will have the strength to create and sustain a world where everyone can flourish. So, do we need values or specific goals? It's not 'either/or', but 'and'. Which values will we need to build this better future? This is a question to inspire our reflections and our dialogues. I do not know the answer. But I am sure that amongst them will be a strong emphasis on the 'we'. Wangari Maathai, the first black African woman to win a Nobel Prize, said: "Mankind's universal values of love, compassion, solidarity, caring and tolerance should form the basis for this global ethic which should permeate culture, politics, trade, religion and philosophy." And Barack Obama put it beautifully in his speech at Nelson Mandela's memorial:

"There is a word in South Africa – Ubuntu – that describes his greatest gift: his recognition that we are all bound together in ways that can be invisible to the eye; that there is a oneness to humanity; that we achieve ourselves by sharing ourselves with others, and caring for those around us." ∞

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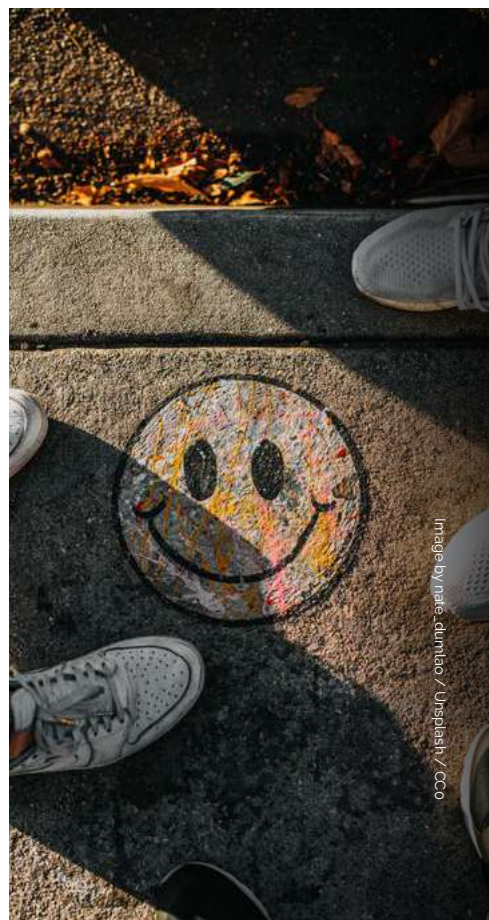



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THE DANCE OF LIFE

By Trishya Screwvala

In our daily life, our ability to keep our gaze centered, despite the external chaos, depends on our ability to find inner stillness; in the continuous dance of life, we must define our own rhythm rather than be taken over by the noise of our surroundings.



Dance is a universal language that transcends geography and time; it is a means to express sentiments that cannot be captured in words. Although forms of dance differ across cultures, the aspiration of a true dancer always seems to remain the same – to assimilate and internalize principles of beauty, harmony and grace through movement and form, thereby escorting the audience to experience and discover these very same archetypes that lie latent within each individual. The pursuit of dance requires auditory, visual and kinesthetic abilities, demanding not only a mastery of the body, but also a sensitivity to aesthetics, spatial awareness, along with an intuitive ability to perceive rhythm. Perhaps it is this ability to seamlessly bring together various elements into a single artistic form that gives dance the unique characteristic of unifying opposites. In my experience as a trained ballet dancer and student of philosophy, I glimpsed the potential of dance to help reveal a fundamental principle of life - that harmony can only be achieved when we are able to find the point of unity between seemingly contrary principles.

From the dizzying pirouettes of a ballerina to the rapid footwork of the Bharatnatyam dancer, movement lies at the heart of all dance. And yet what is most striking is the sense of stillness and stability a dancer exudes, even in the midst of the most frenzied movement. Interestingly, what enables this agility is a strong centre. It is the powerful core muscles that allow the dancer to maintain balance and control in the quickest of routines. And it is the ability to lock eyes on a stable 'centre' while performing an endless sequence of swift turns, that

Since life is always in movement, to aspire to live in accordance with the principles of life, means that the constant need we feel to take a break from this movement, our longing to momentarily hit the "pause" button, is in a way, to stagnate and resist the natural rhythm of life.

gives direction and stability. So too in our daily life, our ability to keep our gaze centered, despite the external chaos, depends on our ability to find inner stillness; in the continuous dance of life, we must define our own rhythm rather than be taken over by the noise of our surroundings.

Furthermore, a dancer will never stand still, for even the resting posture of all dance forms contains subtle but distinct movement – whether an upward pull of the spine, a lengthening of the neck, a dynamic turn out of the legs – a sense of life and energy is ever present. Since life is always in movement, to aspire to live in accordance with the principles of life, means that the constant need we feel to take a break from this movement, our longing to momentarily hit the "pause" button, is in a way, to stagnate and resist the natural rhythm of life.

The strength and musculature of a dancer's body are often celebrated as fundamental to the dexterity and nimbleness of the dancer. It is what allows for the soaring leaps, or conversely, performing in the squatted stance with the body held close to the ground. Yet without flexibility, strength by itself can be detrimental for a dancer. True strength, far from being a rigid and immovable force, perhaps is like water; which can cut



through the hardest of substances, and through its fluidity and adaptability is able to surmount any obstacle in its path. It is this very combination of inner strength coupled with an outer softness that a dancer expresses. Looking at our own lives, often our tendency might be to express these qualities in an inverse order. We might conceal and protect our inner softness, our insecurities or lack of confidence, with an external façade of aggression and hard heartedness, instead of developing a strong and stable centre, which can allow for more flexibility and adaptability in confronting the challenges that life presents us.


Discipline is another key principle synonymous with dance. In fact, the insistence on accuracy, repetition and the strict adherence to discipline that especially the classical arts demand, is often a deterrent to aspiring dancers. Yet it is this very discipline and relentless repetition that enables an artist to master the basics, overcome their own physical and mental limitations, in order to reveal their true potential. A dancer's aching muscles or bleeding toes then become irrelevant, for it is only through this perseverance that they are able to unite with something beyond their own selves. In our daily lives too, perhaps the secret to freeing ourselves from our own limitations and boundaries lies in the value of discipline, if only we persevere to develop it, rather than avoid it.

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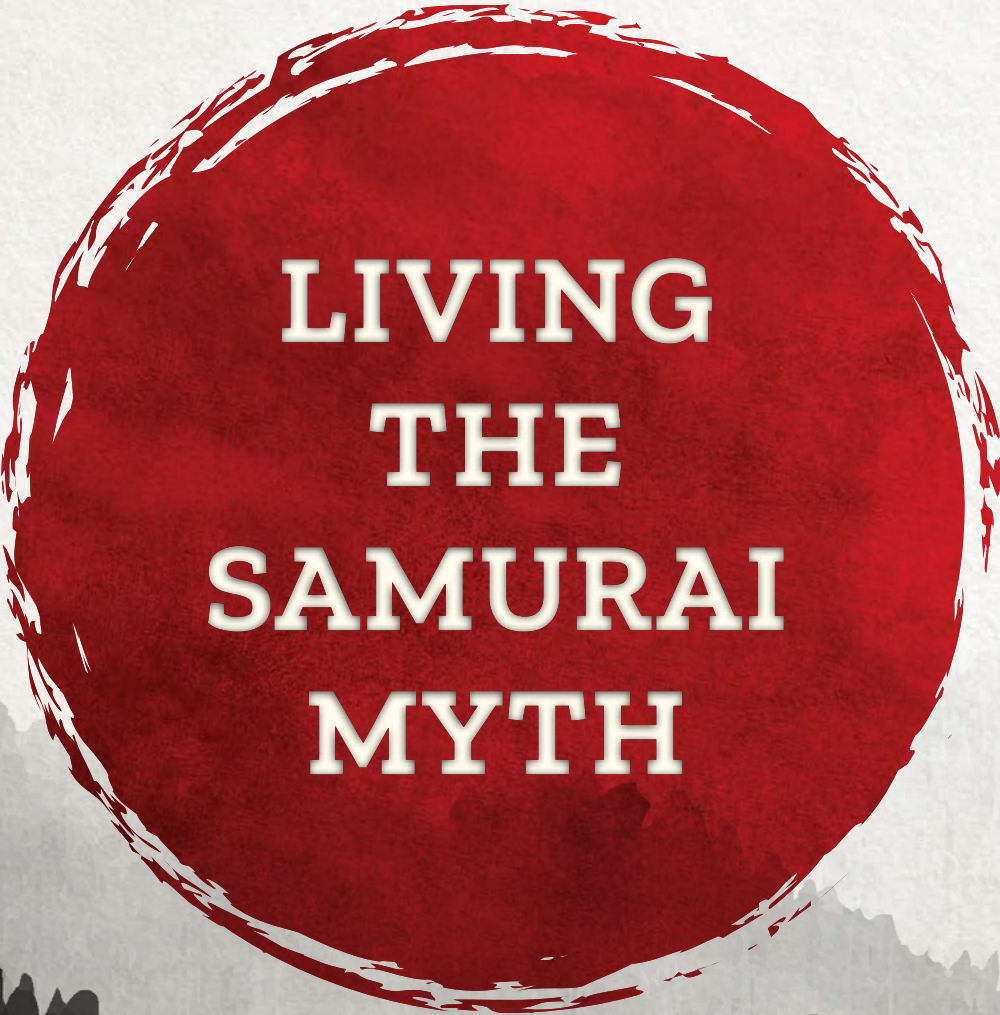


**Giving and
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Mere mastery of technique is not enough to move an audience. The power of dance comes from the ability of the dancer to encounter archetypes far greater than themselves, and become a conduit to share it with the spectator. As an aspiring philosopher I recognise that the performing arts therefore, are not intended to show off physical prowess, but to allow the audience to become part of the harmony of life. In Indian dance forms for example, the dancer strives to become the God, Goddess, or Archetype in the moment of performance, and through this, the audience is invited to touch a divine aspect within themselves. The dancer must therefore simultaneously perceive and share, without differentiating between the two. In nature, we see that every living being simultaneously receives and gives by fulfilling its role. Similarly, we can draw inspiration in our own lives to recognise that giving and receiving, far from being opposites, actually lie on one continuous spectrum.

Dance then, can allow both performer and spectator to momentarily encounter the true nature of reality – the One Life beneath the numerous contradictions on the surface, and the stillness at the centre of continuous movement. If we strive every day, to touch the unity at the heart of the seeming multiplicity of life, each of us can become dancers attuned to the rhythm of life. 





LIVING THE SAMURAI MYTH

By Shraddha Shetty

The word Samurai originally meant 'those who serve', although individuals of this elite warrior class in medieval Japan were also referred to as *Bushi*, or warrior. And *Bushido* was the code of morality which the Samurai were meant to follow, not just in battle, but also in day-to-day activity. Speaking of this code in his book *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*, which is widely considered to be an authority on the subject, Nitobe says that it was not written down anywhere, but had organically formed over centuries. Even though the Samurai comprised less than 10% of the Japanese population at the time, traces of their morality are still found in the everyday life of Japan.



Anyone sincerely practicing the way of virtues naturally becomes more aware of the underlying unity and harmony in nature, because it raises our awareness to the needs of others, and helps us realize that we may not be so different from one another.

The spirit of service which is embodied in the doctor's profession, seeks to ensure that self-interest or personal preference should not cause deviation from duty. Lawyers too, whether on one side of the case in hand, or the other, are ideally guided by the principles of justice and truth, above every other consideration. Similarly, the Samurai were trained to be guided by the spirit of *Bushido*, a moral code of conduct, towards nobility, the eternal human values.

Its guidelines never gave clear-cut lists of do's and don'ts, but demanded internal purification so as to learn to independently discern between what is right to do and what might be deemed dishonourable. Nitobe describes the virtues that characterized this Samurai nobility as rectitude, courage, benevolence, politeness, and mercy, amongst others, in great detail. Drawing inspiration from these, I simply investigate the continuing relevance of these eternal principles in our times.

Zen Buddhism, Shintoism, and the teachings of Confucius seem to have had a great influence in shaping *Bushido* in its practical and moral approach. An anecdote shared by Nitobe illustrates this: A foremost teacher of swordsmanship, on seeing his disciple master the art, tells him, 'Beyond this my instruction must give way to Zen teachings.'

Anyone sincerely practicing the way of virtues naturally becomes more aware of the underlying unity and harmony

Being virtuous was therefore regarded as an individual responsibility of self towards society, and not just a goal for personal growth.

in nature, because it raises our awareness to the needs of others, and helps us realize that we may not be so different from one another. Aren't we all ultimately looking for the same things; to be loved, to be understood? Separation reduces, and with that arises the need to unite and live in harmony. Hence, perhaps observing one's own nature and developing self-restraint, also allows a person to come closer to the underlying spirit in everything. It is said that the inner most sanctuary of Shinto shrines was empty, except for a mirror, as if inviting the seeker to meditate on the self. This concept of looking inwards to understand the world is repeatedly seen in other philosophies. One famous example is the inscription at the entrance of the Temple of Apollo in Delphi, which hints towards something similar: 'Know thyself and you will know the mysteries of the gods and the Universe'.

Nitobe points out that the teachings of Confucius and Mencius also had a strong influence drawing a direct relationship between the practice of values by individuals and the resulting collective social order. Being virtuous was therefore regarded as an individual responsibility of self towards society, and not just a goal for personal growth. For example, the highest requirement that defined a ruler was Benevolence, according to Confucius, which was a central virtue of *Bushido*.

The Samurai were said to be very loyal to their feudal lords, and fought in service of their masters, ready always to lay down their lives. But if the master were to go against morality, a good Samurai would do all that he could to explain the honourable stand. If he failed to convince, the Samurai would prove his sincerity by taking his own life so as not to compromise his integrity, remaining loyal to his code of conduct, without having to betray the master. This was considered an honourable death, regarded nobler than living without values.

Rectitude was another essential virtue to be mastered. Nitobe describes it as aiming a straight arrow at what is right, and to shoot. It seems simple; as soon as you recognize something as right, to just do it. What are the right things that this might apply to in our day-to-day? Getting up when the alarm rings,

It takes courage to surpass our comforts, to do what is right despite the difficulties.



maintaining a good mood, not blaming the world, organizing our space and time, helping when someone asks, careful attention to those who depend on us, etc. Is it simple? Yes. Is it easy? Not always. Why?

It takes courage to surpass our comforts, to do what is right despite the difficulties. Hence, for the Samurai, courage was not relevant only in the face of an external battle, but also when there is a need to live fully each day. Similarly, can we too dare to live with a sense of adventure, and extract the beauty of life amidst adversities? For example, did we manage to express courage during the lockdown?

While on the one hand the Samurai had the courage to lay down their own lives with serenity on a battlefield when needed, on the other hand it is also said that they cherished the breath of life in every single moment. This is indeed inspiring to me personally. It seems to suggest that there is an air of humour in their approach, a lightness towards life, undeterred by external circumstance...a sensitivity in life, to beauty, in situations and relationships and yet ever ready to let go with a poetic smile, if duty demands. Nitobe illustrates this seeming paradox using another anecdote: Dokan, the great builder of the castle of Tokyo, was pierced through with a spear. His assassin, knowing the poetical predilection of his victim, accompanied his thrust with this couplet, "Ah! How in moments like these our heart doth grudge the light of life." Whereupon the expiring hero, not one daunted by the mortal wound in his side, added the lines: "Had not in hours of peace, it learned to lightly look on life."

There is a phrase which goes: *Bushi no nasake*, which speaks of the tenderness of the warrior, suggesting that true power comes not from a position of external authority. Nor does it come from brute force. Instead, true power is the ability to uphold a choice, to exercise mercy, to forgive and be compassionate. These are not a sign of weakness, but an expression of inner strength.

It follows that benevolence and politeness in manners was important to develop. Another anecdote describes a

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stranger who stops a person with a small umbrella, enough for just one, on the street to ask for some address. Even though it is sunny, and answering may take long, the one with the umbrella will close it first, out of respect, and then answer. He would rather partake in the suffering with the stranger, if he cannot alleviate it.

Can we rebuild such a value-based culture today? Where shall we start? Today it is evident that the one who can calculate best within seconds, and has all the knowledge about politics, the economy, science, languages, etc. is celebrated most. But then, what really is the difference between a computer and a human being? What sets us apart from the machines that we create, as well as from the animals and plants?

Traditions universally highlight that human beings have the capacity to choose nobility, and uphold values at all odds. We can imagine and find solutions to challenges together, and we can choose to live in harmony with one another, and with life. The principles of *Bushido* can serve to awaken our conscience, in order to reach our best potential, individually and collectively. As the mythical Phoenix rises from its own ashes, might we too dare to revive the Samurai myth and awaken once again, our inner warrior? ☯

FROM OBSTACLE TO OPPORTUNITY

By Gilad Sommer



A Story of Exile

The year was 65 AD, a little less than a hundred years after the assassination of Julius Caesar and the foundation of the Roman Empire. Musonius Rufus, the foremost Stoic philosopher of his times, known by some as the "Roman Socrates", was accused by emperor Nero to have participated in a conspiracy against him, and was exiled to a tiny and desolate Greek island called Gyaros

Gyaros was considered a terrible place to be. Fifty years earlier the then emperor Tiberius, who wasn't known for his charitable nature, refused to send a traitor to exile there, saying it was too harsh and devoid of human culture.

Nevertheless, instead of languishing in exile, Musonius was not only able to establish a farm on the arid island, but also to form a community

of philosophers who travelled to Gyaros specially to study with him. He transformed an arid island into an unlikely center of philosophy.

Musonius practiced the Stoic discipline of transforming obstacles into opportunities.

Every obstacle in life presents us with an opportunity to turn inward and to invoke our own submerged inner resources. The trials we endure can and should introduce us to our strengths.

In his talk about exile, Musonius said: "*Certainly the person who is exiled is not prevented from possessing courage and justice simply because he is banished, nor is he denied self-control or any virtue that brings honour and benefit to the man with a good reputation and worthy of praise.*" In other words, no external situation can prevent us from developing and practicing our inner strengths.

Later on, Rufus would become the teacher of a well-known Stoic philosopher – Epictetus. Following the footsteps of his philosophy Master, Epictetus phrased the discipline of transforming obstacles to opportunities thus: "*Every obstacle in life presents us with an opportunity to turn inward and to invoke our own submerged inner resources. The trials we endure can and should introduce us to our strengths.*" ("The Art of Living" (*Enchiridion*), translated by Sharon Label.)





About the Stoics

A little background on the Stoics and their teachings is due.

Stoics believed that the most important thing for human happiness and fulfillment is not material success, but the development of virtue.

Stoicism was a school of philosophy in the classical manner, that is, a school of philosophy as a way of life; it was one of the several philosophy schools that sprouted in Greece after the death of Socrates. While these schools differed in their theories, they all shared a certain view of philosophy. For them, philosophy was not just about theorizing or having great thoughts, rather, it was a combination of knowledge and a way of life. One was expected to live in a certain

way, to follow certain guidelines, to study with teachers who pointed out one's errors and gave a living example of the doctrine.

Stoicism gained popularity in the Roman republic during the turbulent times of its dying days, and it reached its apex in the first century of the Roman empire, as it struggled with the tyranny and madness of some of its first emperors. At that time, Stoicism became a synonym for resistance to tyranny and a frugal life. Later on, Stoicism became an integral part of the education of the nobility, and the last famous practitioner of Stoicism was the philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius; with his death, Stoicism kind of disappeared from the pages of history, although its influence lingered on, inspiring a few Stoic rebirths throughout history, including the one taking place today.

Obstacles and Opportunities

What did the Stoics teach about obstacles and opportunities?

Today, when we speak about opportunity, we usually put it in the context of business ventures or a career opportunity, as that is the nature of our times. But for the Stoics, opportunity was something else altogether. It would really be no exaggeration to say that business and earthly success was not one of the top preoccupations of Stoic philosophy. The Stoics believed that the most important thing for human happiness and fulfillment is not material success, but the development of virtue. Originating in the Latin *virtutem*, the word virtue refers to excellence of character.



We would speak about *strengths* today. The Stoics believed that the best opportunities are those which allow us to develop our virtues.

That means that the circumstances of our lives, that is, whether we are rich or poor, healthy or sick, famous or infamous, successful or

unsuccessful, all these elements which our lives normally revolve around, are only second to our moral and spiritual well-being. The Stoics called all these elements *indifferents* (*adiaphora*) and proposed a simple way to recognize them – if it's not completely under your control, you should treat it with a certain sense of indifference.

For example, we can act to protect ourselves against illnesses, but there's no guarantee we are not going to be sick; we can work hard to achieve success in our business, but then a global pandemic can appear from nowhere and we go bankrupt.

True opportunity lies, then, in the way we react to the circumstances of our lives.

We should also emphasize that the Stoics lived in a time where the harsher realities of life were much more in the open; most Romans fought in wars, child mortality was higher, plagues were common. They did not have a sheltered existence, and they recognized the relative smallness of the human being as compared to the tremendous forces of nature. They, perhaps more than the modern person, recognized that we have influence over our circumstances, but not control.

If our circumstances are indifferent, then what is it that really matters?

Rationally speaking, most of our attention and effort should be given to those things we have control over. There's no point in trying to change

the weather. Those things that are really under our control, or potentially our control are our own reactions, our own thoughts, our own behavior. True opportunity lies, then, in the way we react to the circumstances of our lives.

That is not to say it's not better to have some money in your pocket than not. The Stoics believed some indifferents are preferred over others – for example health and life are preferred over illness and death; wealth and success are preferred over poverty and failure, and so on. These are natural preferences most people will probably agree on.

It is natural to want to promote the preferred indifferents (i.e. wealth, reputation, health, etc.) over the unpreferred ones (i.e. poverty, sickness, death, etc.), but if you have to make a choice between a preferred indifferent and your moral axis, then you should focus on what is truly under your control. In other words, it is better to live in infamy but with a clear conscience, than successfully but sacrificing one's ethical principles.

Now let's talk about obstacles. An obstacle, from the Latin *obstare* [impede], means something, whether internal or external, which prevents us from getting where or what we want. We must take note once more that in our world obstacles are usually presented in the context of personal success, again, that's the zeitgeist. But for the Stoics, more than personal success, *duty* was the central motivator in life. Each of us must ask ourselves what our duties in life are, what do we owe life, what do we owe others, what do we owe our society, our community. For the Stoics, self-realization cannot be separated from participation in social life.

When trying to carry out our duties, many obstacles can appear, some can be removed or avoided, others can't. But the important thing is not whether they can be removed or not, but whether we were able to transform the obstacle into an opportunity to make some of our latent powers into active ones. Every obstacle in life forces us to bring out the best elements in ourselves, those which are lying dormant, waiting for an opportunity to appear. A difficult co-worker – patience and compassion, relationship troubles – gentleness and empathy; a fear of facing a novel situation – courage and initiative, and so forth.

Every obstacle in life forces us to bring out the best elements in ourselves, those which are lying dormant, waiting for an opportunity to appear.

In the words of Epictetus: *If you encounter an attractive person, then self-restraint is the resource needed; if pain or weakness, then stamina; if verbal abuse, then patience. As time goes by and you build on the habit of matching the appropriate inner resource to each incident, you will not tend to get carried away by life's appearances. You will stop feeling overwhelmed so much of the time.*

The Practice of Virtue – Philosophy

As an example to the practice of virtue, psychologist Donald J. Robertson in his article "The Stoic Virtues and Code of Honor" offers

a synthetic code of behavior based on the four Platonic virtues that are at the heart of the Stoic way of life:

1. Love the truth and seek wisdom (Wisdom)
2. Act with justice, fairness, and kindness toward others (Justice)
3. Master your fears and be courageous (Courage)
4. Master your desires and live with self-discipline (Temperance)

Click below for additional reading:

[The Stoic Virtues and Code of Honor, by Donald Robertson](#)

[A Stoic Guide to the Emotions, by Gilad Sommer](#)

[Above All, Be Good – The Story of the Stoics and their Teachings, by Gilad Sommer](#)

This is a good synthesis of what it means to act virtuously, and looking over this code, we can see that there is no circumstance in our lives that can prevent us from trying to apply these guidelines. Whether we keep our jobs or lose them is not completely in our control, but whether we choose to act with justice, courage and temperance is, or potentially is, if we train ourselves in the practice of philosophy. ☯☯



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THE NOBLE SPIRIT OF COMPETITION

By Markus Edin



In the beginning the Olympics were as much a religious festival as an athletic event.

With the 2020 Olympic Games being cancelled we may seize the opportunity to reconnect with the spirit of this most famous and prestigious sporting event. For it has not always existed in the format we know it today, the ancient Olympics serving a vastly different purpose than the modern day Olympic Games. Just how far back they date is a matter of debate but most sources agree that the first Olympics of the ancient world took place in 776 BCE, while others argue they date back much further. One founding myth tells us that Heracles himself held the first Olympics in honour of his father Zeus after defeating King Augeas whose stables he cleaned in his 5th labour but did not receive the agreed reward.

In the beginning the Olympics were as much a religious festival as an athletic event. The athletes would put their skill on display to follow in the footsteps of Heracles. Excelling in a religious festival was of great importance and seen as an honour for the whole state to the extent that during the Olympics rival cities would declare a truce so that their athletes could compete.

The word "athlete" takes on a wider meaning as Greek gymnasiums did not offer only physical exercise but also held lectures on philosophy, literature, music and medicine. They were an important part of spiritual and social life in Greece and supplied the training for the city's best athletes. A healthy mind in a healthy body, as well as a well formed soul in a well formed body. The education of the youths was almost solely taking place in the gymnasiums of Greece to bring out upright, healthy citizens with strong morals and ethics. This made the Olympics one of the most important Festivals of ancient Greece, so much so that the first calendars are in the 4 year interval in which the games would take place. These intervals were called Olympiads.

In the first Olympics the only discipline that resembled a sporting event was a footrace over 176m, a distance allegedly set by Heracles which was called a "stade", from which the word "Stadium" is derived.

A defeat in any discipline was not seen as a personal failure but as a recognition that the opponent had a higher mastery of whichever discipline they were engaged in.


Further to the footrace the festival also consisted of artistic disciplines such as sculpting, singing and poetry to bring out the more internal traits of the "athlete" participating. In the succeeding Olympics other disciplines were added such as wrestling, boxing, javelin throwing and others.

As fiercely fought as the competitions between athletes from rival states were, mutual respect was held in high regard. A defeat in any discipline was not seen as a personal failure but as a recognition that the opponent had a higher mastery of whichever discipline they were engaged in. The moral character and discipline to overcome your own challenges was instilled in the gymnasiums from a very young age. And so was the ability to accept the defeat and recognise the opponents skill. This is what differentiates victory from simply being successful.



One can be victorious even in defeat. Being victorious is therefore also our ability to pick ourselves back up after we have been defeated in whatever challenge we chose or life has brought us. It is only when we put ourselves to the test that we learn how to wrestle with our weaknesses.

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Competition fostering excellence was the understanding of the time and this spirit would later be revived in the founding principal of the modern Olympic games: "The importance in the Olympic Games is not to win, but to take part; the important thing in Life is not to triumph, but the struggle, the essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well." This quote is from Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the International Olympic Committee (I.O.C.). It reflects perfectly the noble spirit of competition the Olympic games can inspire, the difference between victory and success. 

A DIARY OF A STRUGGLING ECOLOGIST

By Ubai Husein

This journey started with my love for food, which prompted me to pursue a degree in Culinary Arts. There, in addition to simply cooking, I was introduced to the various aspects about growing and producing food before it enters the kitchen, including the entire mechanism of factory farming and the resulting destruction caused to the environment. Fortunately, I was also introduced to the other end of the spectrum: Organic farming and SLOW foods (Sustainable, Local, Organic, Wholesome) and the whole stratosphere of environmental issues, campaigns and lifestyle changes that come with it. For what it was worth, it left enough an impact on me to continue exploring and delving deeper. I turned to advocacy campaigning and education, and started up a small not-for-profit, vehemently against industrialized agriculture, among other things.

Life took over in the next few years; in addition to running the NGO, I was training to take over the family business, and learning to be a husband and a father, when I came across New Acropolis, and was introduced to philosophical and metaphysical concepts of creation, evolution, and the need to discover a purpose in life.

After 4 years of struggling to make the NGO sustainable, my ecological pursuits, along with the NGO were shelved. At the time we justified it saying that society was not yet ready. I know now, however, that the fault lay elsewhere; deep down there was a selfish need for personal return on the effort, which the model could simply not sustain. The idea and the intention itself was beautiful, but a sincere spirit of volunteering was missing - the inspiration and fortitude that was required to pull through despite the lack of apparent gains to be made personally.



I realised that under the guise of philanthropy, I was actually simply drawn to externally exciting activities, on my own terms, and seeking attention and recognition. With this I set off to learn to overcome the drive of personal gain in my acts of service.'

Fast forward 10 years. The need to find solutions to the problems that society faces today continues. At New Acropolis I have had several opportunities to volunteer. I started off with initiatives I felt a personal connection with; naturally I was drawn to ecological work.



Life shows us clearly that no one species is lesser or more than another; each has a unique place, and a specific role to play. Only human beings seem to have forgotten their place and lost touch with the order and harmony of the intricate web of life.'

However, again I suffered from the tendency of losing interest after a while, when the going got tough. Upon reflection and guidance from other volunteers, it became clear that rather than a problem of external causes, there was a need to engage with the real problem of my own attitude towards the work. I realised that under the guise of philanthropy, I was actually simply drawn to externally exciting activities, on my own terms, and seeking attention and recognition. With this I set off to learn to overcome the drive of personal gain in my acts of service. And I learned that true volunteering can only really be referred to as such when someone works towards a greater cause without any hint of personal gain; simply because it is the right thing to do.

Though my philosophy study, I have come to appreciate, with a far deeper understanding, the connectedness of all life within a natural

ecosystem - every component, from the minerals in the soil, to the plants, insects, animals and birds finds a niche for itself, while contributing to the a sustained balance of the whole. Life shows us clearly that no one species is lesser or more than another; each has a unique place, and a specific role to play. Only human beings seem to have forgotten their place and lost touch with the order and harmony of the intricate web of life. I've come to realize that we have an obligation to take our place and reclaim this harmony with nature.

Whether it is consciously or unconsciously, we do affect the environment around us. Everything that we consume has a lifecycle - it comes from somewhere and the waste goes somewhere. Not taking responsibility of this consciously perhaps, is an important contributing factor to the challenges faced by

‘Being ecologically conscious of the impact of our consumption, taking responsibility for it, and ensuring that the damage being done is mitigated, is not a matter of choice really; rather it is an obligation.’

our planet. Being ecologically conscious of the impact of our consumption, taking responsibility for it, and ensuring that the damage being done is mitigated, is not a matter of choice really; rather it is an obligation. So today, when I engage in environmentally conscious or eco-friendly work, I have learnt to call it for what it is. I do not think that I am doing something extraordinary that needs accolades and recognition. It is simply the right thing to do, the most ethical choice in every situation.

Therefore, I choose to buy organic food from local growers when possible because it simply makes sense to eat healthy, without burdening the planet with any additional carbon footprint. I ride a bicycle, not only because it is an efficient non-polluting way of getting around locally, but also because

it is a great way to keep in touch with what is happening around me, getting some exercise while at it. I segregate my waste at home on humanitarian grounds, more than on ecological principle; rag-pickers depend on picking through the garbage as a source of income. I compost my waste at home because it pains me to know that I too am responsible for contributing to a landfill spewing toxic emissions into the land and oceans. And I maintain a kitchen garden, not only for access to small pickings of fresh herbs, but also because it allows my kids to work with nature and better understand where their food comes from, fostering empathy towards the ones who grow it.

I do have my low days, where laziness kicks in and prevents me from doing something



that I know is right, simply because it is inconvenient, boring or laborious. Every time I neglect to clean out a plastic bag, preferring to throw it in the bin, every time I see that my compost pit has been neglected, or that my bicycle has collected dust from disuse, I know that I am slipping, and allowing personal circumstances to get in the way of what I understand to be right. In such moments I recognize that I allowed the negligence, which resulted directly as a greater burden on the planet. But with only a bit of conscience, I see a mirror, and an opportunity for correction – to check myself, and apply my will to overcome the tendencies of the personality, to do what I am supposed to do; what I expect of myself.

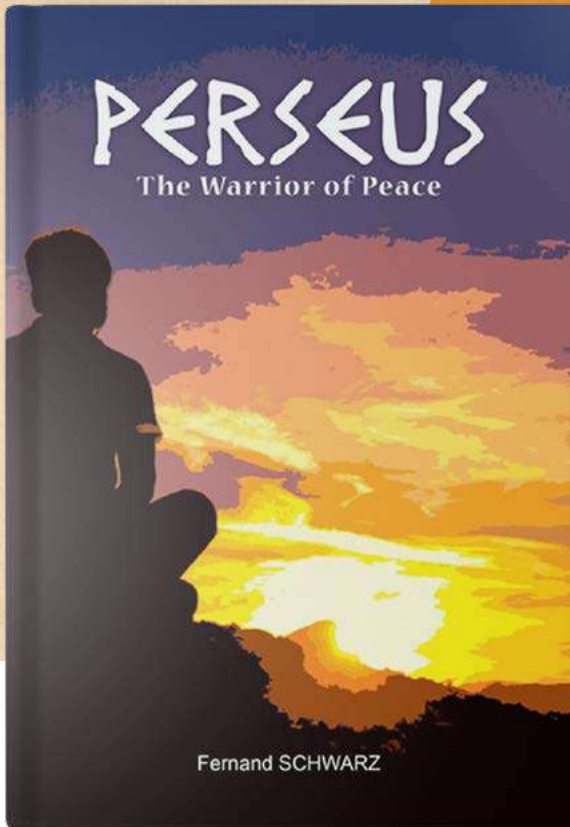
It doesn't really serve to judge others for their consumption patterns or their negligence of the environment. As I see it, each individual has to go through this process of understanding the real impact of their choices. The negative emotions that I would earlier harbour against others were not helping anyone; on the contrary, they were simply adding more separation, in an already torn world.

I understand today that practicing an eco-friendly lifestyle is not as much a matter of doing, as it is a matter of being. Being eco-friendly requires a realization of the fine balance in nature that is maintained by each and every organism, and specifically the realization and fulfilment of the role of the human being as its integral part. I believe that we need to remind ourselves of our place in the larger scheme of life, and if we find our place and our role, and dare to practice our purpose, this world will be a far better place tomorrow. ○○○

The negative emotions that I would earlier harbour against others were not helping anyone; on the contrary, they were simply adding more separation, in an already torn world.'



Image from the New Acropolis India archives



BOOK RECOMMENDATION

PERSEUS: THE WARRIOR OF PEACE

By Fernand Schwarz

In a world of transition, today's youth must take up new challenges, undreamed-of by past generations. But as in all perilous times, to face the challenge, one must have stable, tried and tested inner bearings and a correct inner disposition. The path of the warrior of peace is an ancient one. It is the implementation of teachings of wisdom, giving priority to the being and its choices, over "having" and appearances. Only by drinking from this source is it possible to work towards a new and better world, a world in which each person can find his place, a world capable of solidarity and common wealth, a world which notably begins with self-transformation. To learn to believe in oneself, in order to gradually go through each phase of one's inner path, with the successive unfolding of one's potential, is the only way to discover the freedom to choose and seize one's own destiny. Today's youth, like past youth, is always ready to play a role. However, we still need enthusiastic role-models like Perseus, the warrior of peace, to inspire souls and to nurture self confidence.

Warrior of Peace: Is This a Contradiction?

The notions of a warrior and of peace seem to be irreconcilably contradictory. And in our epoch, we do not like contradictions. We do not know how to handle them. We are taught to put things into two columns: correct and incorrect. This is called formal logic, wherein the principle of exclusion applies, and is very reassuring. Something is either white or black, hot or cold, a man or a woman, day or night, good or evil. Thus when you place yourself on one side, you see from a certain vantage point those who are on the other side. From there it will seem that the fault, the responsibility for what is wrong, is never yours - but lies with those who are on the other side.

Paradoxically, this binary vision, which is very useful for our technology and for the development of a spoken and written language, is not capable of rendering reality. It can only facilitate a fragmented vision. And we desperately stand by the fragments that suit us in order to reassure ourselves. For example, what time is it on the planet? With the binary approach, the answer would be the time at the place at which we currently are. But in reality our dear planet Earth lives all twenty-four hours simultaneously. And as per binary logic, such a concept is unthinkable. "Is it day or night on planet Earth?" The answer is: both. Everything happens at the same time.

To understand this, we must think day and night, man and woman, hot and cold. It is the logic of inclusion, which integrates the parts into a vital global whole. It is by this alone that we can practice the art of uniting the opposites, a principle which supports life, and which lies at the very heart of the teachings

of my master and of my own approach.

We must be warriors in order to fight our indifference, our selfishness, our separateness, our fragmented vision and our pettiness. The warrior in question is not a bloody killer but is engaged in the battle within oneself.

The peaceful person is not the person who wishes to be left alone in peace, who does nothing that may disturb him or cause himself to be noticed. The peaceful person is the person who can live in peace with his conscience, the source of calmness and serenity which helps us face the difficulties of life. The peaceful warrior is only an apparent contradiction. He fights to bring peace within himself and around him.

We can define the quest for the peaceful warrior as the art of mastery over oneself by learning to adapt, learning to follow the course of things. It is a conscious process of transformation that leads to profound happiness; an inner state that cannot be reversed.

The deepest battle is to stop the calculations and open the heart. The expectation for immediate results, as inculcated by our education and our system of life, closes us from the inside and prevents us from proper conduct in the battle. I have found that when human beings cannot defend what is noble and just, they always accumulate tension that makes them aggressive and violent. It is then that selfishness takes precedence over altruism. These transference tactics are put in place when the human being can no longer act with the greatness of his soul. The path of the peaceful warrior aims to endow dignity to every human being. It is as old as our species.

An Immense Potential at Our Disposal

The way of the peaceful warrior, present in the ancient wisdom of the East and the West, teaches that each one of us, at the heart of our being, has an immense potential. This enables us to grow and to become better. Only the awakening and the actualization of this potential enables the development of the "knowledge-being". Three stages seem important for this actualization, which I can synthesize into three directives: to overcome oneself; to liberate oneself and others; to build and to be built.

To Overcome Oneself

In this stage, which is related to the art of the inner battle, we must become able to mobilize our own will. This means to implement courage and authenticity to apply the laws of life, teaching us to correct ourselves by extracting our latent potential. It is through the practice of discipline – which should not be rigid – that we will overcome inertia and gradually diminish our comfort zones. If we are motivated to express the true nature of our being, we will practice this new art of living, leading us to become the victorious warriors who defeat their own selves.

To Liberate Oneself and To Liberate Others

At this stage, we must learn to discern between what is useful and what is superfluous, by understanding our real needs. It is said that life is a journey in which one has to move without much weight. We must learn to unleash our energy which, in the Hindu and Buddhist tradition, is called Virya.

According to this theory, which in my experience has proven to be true, when someone is engaged with a cause, he discovers means he did not even suspect existed. Paradoxically,

the practice of commitment lets loose new energies, such as the gift of the self, the gift of presence. One then possesses the real weapons, for which detachment is the key. With it, the opening of the heart becomes possible. And the best weapon becomes the ability to think with the heart, as explained in Egyptian thought, and as relayed to me by my master. Expressing the good in oneself, and sharing that goodness with others, produces an extraordinarily purifying effect. We become detached from external thoughts, prejudices, critical judgments and useless comparisons. As in Plato's cave, we gradually release ourselves from our chains to face the light of day – reality as it is. At that moment the warrior is born, the liberator of mankind. For it is not possible to help others, if we have not already had the same experience ourselves.

To Build and To Be Built

The pursuit of the True and the Good helps us take the first steps. The concepts of the Just and the Beautiful can inspire us to build ourselves. Intelligence is the potential that awakens, making us capable of discerning and directing all of our mental abilities. Discernment allows us to see beyond appearances and, with the help of love-will, penetrate the inner nature of things, where true knowledge resides. At that moment, an awareness emerges within us: we are not alone, we are interdependent with other human beings and with nature. We will now learn that in order to find the right expressions, in order to be and to act at the same time, we must reject tension and any form of rigidity. It is the respect and understanding of certain inner laws of nature that will soften our souls and give us the right expression. ○○○

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PHILOSOPHY

Philosophy, when it is practical, is educational. It helps us to know ourselves and to improve ourselves. To be a philosopher is a way of life committed to the best aspirations of humanity.



CULTURE

The practice of human values is the basis for a model of active and participative Culture, which brings out the qualities of each person, broadens the horizons of the mind and opens the human being up to all the expressions of the spirit.



Volunteering is the natural expression of a spirit of union with life and humanity, which manifests in the practice of values such as unselfishness, commitment and striving for the common good.



VOLUNTEERING



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