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*The Hwarang's Path – Humility
(part 1)*

By: Grandmaster Taejoon Lee

After over forty years of teaching and over fifty years of training in the Korean Martial and Healing Art of Hwa Rang Do®, the Way of the Flowering Manhood, founded by my father, Supreme Grandmaster Dr. Joo Bang Lee, I have grown to understand that the most important and noble human character, which is also most rare and difficult to cultivate, hence its immeasurable value is humility.

It is deeply rooted in the nature of man, the struggle between son and father, the created and the creator, man and God. It is foundational and lies at the heart of all human endeavors; the desire to achieve greatness, to accomplish what was impossible, to strive to be the best, to be first, to win, to be recognized, remembered and immortalized.

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We are not born with humility, yet with purity. We are given the intrinsic desire to learn and understand the world around us, filled with wonderment absent of fear and consequence. As we get older which equates with maturity, the desire for understanding and truth becomes corrupted with the desires of the world and the need for recognition. We soon realize that we must compete with others in order to get more of that which we desire, whether it be the promise of pleasure, happiness, and love from fame, fortune, and/or power, all the best of what the world can offer becomes our life's pursuit, our ambition fueled from pride and ego. Furthermore, we learn of fear through pain and suffering, which leads to dedicating our entire lives seeking and creating ways to avoid, overcome, or protect ourselves from the things that we fear the most.

Innocence is replaced with fear, wonderment with doubt, joy with pleasure, peace with struggle, harmony with competition, unconditional love becomes conditional, purity becomes contaminated, and strength equates with winning and success while weakness with losing and failure, all for the sake of survival in the world. I immigrated to America from South Korea when I was nine years old in the early 1970s. From that time to my early teens were some of the most turbulent, violent times of my life. You would think that as kids that we would all be innocent and coexist in blissful harmony at play. Far from the truth, I got into fights almost every week and for me, going to school everyday was like going to war. Kids were cruel and merciless without compassion and empathy, which were traits yet to be acquired; they were intolerant to anything that was new, strange or foreign. Either you had to conform to their ways or be ostracized; risk being criticized, picked on, and bullied or stand up and

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fight, which even in adulthood never changes. Being raised in a warrior culture and as the heir to Hwa Rang Do, of course I chose to fight!

I am not going to go into details of my childhood here, but it is to illustrate that our social conditioning to fit into the world, being accepted by the majority, the status quo as prescribed by the existing social order starts young and surely this is common to all children and not isolated only to me. We are raised and taught that we must be the best amongst our peers and always strive to be the best in order to succeed. And, the only way to succeed is to be willing to achieve it no matter what the cost. One of the main requirements of maturity or adulthood is the understanding that all things have a price. It is easy when we are young, lacking wisdom to stake our life on such idioms when we do not understand life's true worth and its ultimate price. Of course, there lies the problem as it takes maturity to realize childishness and it requires intelligence to recognize foolishness.

Recently, I had the opportunity to view a documentary series "The Last Dance", which chronicled the life of Michael Jordan with the basketball team, the Chicago Bulls, as they made history in winning six NBA World Championships during the 1990s, never losing an NBA Final series in the history of the game. In watching Michael Jordan being interviewed throughout the series, I could not help but to feel some negative tension exuding from his demeanor and tone of his interview. For a man who has accomplished so much during his career, who has become a living legend, a role model for many youths, accomplishing what no other basketball player has ever done and probably the best basketball player in history, a household name throughout the entire world, having amassed incredible fortune with a



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beautiful family, by the end of the series you are not filled with joy, contentment, and gratitude, but rather sadness, emptiness, and loneliness. It didn't end like a fairytale, but rather a tragedy.

The series ended with the disbandment of the team and Jordan being discontent after over twenty years later for not having the opportunity to win a seventh World Championship. It left me wondering the question, how much is enough? This feeling of discontentment, unfulfilled emptiness is not isolated to Jordan, but to all of us. When is it enough? When we have achieved what we set out to accomplish that we felt would give us the ultimate satisfaction, happiness, and pleasure what more is there? What would be the reason to continue living?

Closer to our hearts as martial artists, Miyamoto Musashi was the greatest swordsman of Japan who lived over 400 years ago, being undefeated in presumed 61 duels. He died as a hermit and as legend has it that he

made a sculpture of all the swordsmen who died by his blade and each day he prayed for them in a cave until his death. Having been driven to be the best, he set out to prove that he was the best swordsman. How many duels would have satisfied him, how much longer would he have dueled if his health would permit it, and how many more men would he have to kill to be satisfied?

Surely, in order to truly be the best, Musashi would have had to win every swordsman in the world and not only in Japan. Just as Jordan or any other person who strives to be the best among all others, they can never be satisfied as the desire to win, to prove that you are the best is in fact not an external motivation but an internal battle, a hunger that can never be fulfilled, a thirst that can never be quenched. The desire to be the best can only be motivated by negative forces rooted in the malady of insecurity, inferiority, and the fears of rejection and mortality. The greater the intensity of such maladies, the greater the drive

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and ambition, which fuels the individual to achieve what was impossible, pushing the boundaries and limitations of the human race, but never knowing the full consequences and always with the price of loneliness and discontentment for the individual.

Hence it is the extent of the pain, suffering, and hardship, which we had to endure in the early part of our lives that ignites the desire to achieve, to prove, to win; the child who's mother dies of illness is motivated to become a doctor to find a cure; the boy who is bullied and beaten as a child grows to be the world champion fighter never allowing to be beaten; the alienated unsociable child who takes comfort in the imagination goes on to be the writer of novels never to be rejected again; the child living in impoverished



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circumstances becomes the billionaire business man never being hungry again; the boy with an abusive father who felt powerless to protect his mother and siblings becomes the heroic soldier never to feel powerless again, and on and on...

Michael Jordan became competitive with his older brother to win the affection and approval of his father, which lead him to hate losing in anything he pursued. Miyamoto Musashi's birth, his early childhood, and even the identity of his parents are a mystery with many theories of his bloodline. The fact is, he was raised by his uncle from the age of seven, leaving him uncertain of his true parents with feelings of abandonment as well as contracting eczema as an infant, giving him an adverse appearance only added to his insecurities. They were both compelled to prove themselves, to be accepted by others, to gain the love of their known or unknown parents. The desire for acceptance, recognition, and approval, especially by our parents, our creator is primal for all human beings deeply rooted in the origin of humankind.

And, for those of us who cannot achieve the successes prescribed by society, we make all attempts to accept our

mediocre circumstance, yet always living with the lurking dissatisfaction, hoping, dreaming of something better. Very rare are those individuals who were raised in a home with loving parents, without conflict or struggle, enduring no pain and hardship, protected from the harms of society, producing loving, grateful children who live on to be kind and generous adults fully content with their lives. Whether we achieve greatness and reached the pinnacle or failed in the attempt, we cannot escape the emptiness within, the dissatisfaction of life.

Humility is not a choice or a decision that we suddenly wake up with one morning, deciding that yes I am going to be humble, I am going to think of myself lesser, that I am common like everyone else and that no one is better or worse than I am. Actually, this thought of commonality, that I am no better than anyone else is often the root of suicide. The feeling that the individual is not special is surrendering to the idea that there is no purpose for the self and if there's no purpose, then there's no self-worth. Purpose is not defined by commonality, but by uniqueness.



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