

The Aging Martial Artist, by Dr. Dennis E. McCain, 6th Dan

Submitted on June 23, 2011 to Master Brad Whitlow

Introduction: No one argues that our bodies change over time. From our younger years, we begin growing, becoming stronger, taller, and heavier. We began our lives being held by parents, fed by parents, learning from parents, and depending upon our parents. As we matured, our thinking and ability to care for ourselves also matured.

Likewise, these same changes naturally occur from the onset of our martial art training. We began at white belt, being guided and fed by our instructor, learning from our instructor, and depending upon our instructor for the basic knowledge and skills that we needed to fulfill our goal of reaching the black belt level.

Often in our early and late teen years, we thought we knew more than we really did. Yet, at the same time, physically, we are beginning to experience the potential of what we will become as adults. In martial arts, the “teen” years at first degree black belt are just the beginning of our early experience with power, balance, flexibility and the ability to jump and run. If our instructor has accomplished his/her job teaching, we realized that there was much more that we needed to learn.

We traveled through the early years of our black belt training, growing incrementally from month to month and year to year. We often do not “see” these changes because they are often minute or imperceptible. In my earlier training with Mr. Louie Aregis Jr., it seemed that the power of the scoop block was evading me. Its movement seemed awkward and lacked snap and power. As I continued training (at the level of 2nd Dan), the movement “suddenly” seemed more fluid and crisp. In actuality, while practicing and analyzing the movement over the years it had become a crisp and powerful movement.

In 1986, at 40 years of age, I began to develop a more controlled power. Now I am 64 years old and, certainly, many things have become more evident. My body has changed due to normal aging, injuries, surgeries, and, in a positive and unusual way, has become more powerful.

Changes in our power, balance, flexibility and possible inability to jump are all part of the aging process. Although some areas may become weaker over time, other areas can become stronger. The nature of aging is complex, but maturity in the art, a realization that we have less to prove than we did when we were younger, and a desire to continue training, cause the older martial artist to become wiser and more powerful in unique ways.

Some of the movements, such as jumping, may not be as safe for us to perform as they once were. Often, substituting an optional movement in the pattern, and then performing that movement in a powerful way, teaches us the versatility of the art as we continue to practice.

Some areas of physical training changed in my life as I aged. I felt that others might perceive me as less of a martial artist, if I did not or could not perform the movements as I once did in my 20's or 30's. At one point, my ego began to get in the way. I was concerned how I might project my personal ability, and how that might affect my teaching. I wanted my student's lives to be enhanced and strengthened, and for them to perceive the real greatness of their art.

I believe that martial art training is more than just kicking and punching our way to some desired goal for our own ego gratification or the admiration of others. I have found that my own life has been strengthened by martial art training in areas beside physical prowess. My spiritual growth, character development, mental acuteness, and personal confidence are now on a higher level of priority than being recognized or admired. Over time, students will naturally admire and emulate their instructors and become a shadowy reflection of the person who trained them (not only emulating power and movement, but also in areas of personal character development and spiritual growth).

So, as we mature (i.e. age) nothing is detracted from our manhood. The humbling process of aging gives us a better sense of personal power in our lives.

I may not be able to perform some of the physical movements in the same manner that I did when I was younger. However, my life is more powerful in some ways.

I believe that the greater challenge of training as an older person is to maintain a high standard of workouts and to be diligent in every aspect of training. The greater our work ethic, the greater our personal achievement will be, and the greater opportunity we will have to reach our personal goals.

Senior Goals and Personal Achievement (Spiritual Priorities)

Subtle Power: In contemplating the subtlety of power, my thoughts were turned to Jesus. He was not only the Son of God and God the Son, but He was an amazing person. He startled and amazed the populace in every city He visited. The Apostle Matthew wrote in the Gospel of Matthew 13:54, *“And when he was come into his own country, he taught them in their synagogue, insomuch that they were astonished, and said, Whence hath this man this wisdom, and these mighty works?”*

The power of a person's life should not be summed up in mere physical attributes. Over the years, I have met dozens of people who appear to be average individuals at first glance.

After speaking with them and observing their lives, I noticed that they were however, quite powerful spiritually. The power was subtle in that it was first not observable. Certainly, this area of spiritual development is critical to life itself. It should be the goal of every martial artist to achieve spiritual power. This power should be real to those who observe us, and should affect their lives in a positive manner. What I mean by *subtle power* is an inherent power that exemplifies itself in vital areas of living, especially by example, as students naturally evaluate their instructor. We should not desire mere physical power, but that spiritual power will exhibit itself naturally as we make spiritual progress in our own lives.

Only as we grow day by day in progressive subtle power spiritually and emotionally can its full impact be felt by others. This sustained subtle power is what generates the character that is desired and admired.

Reserved power: In the Old Testament Eliphaz the Temanite said to Job, *“Yet man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward.”* Real life is fraught with difficulties, strife, stress, and circumstances which can try the human heart. How can we deal with these long term issues of life, unless we are filled with some sense of God’s presence and power that may be called upon when the time comes? In life, we need someone (God) or something (His power), that will be available over time to claim victory in seemingly impossible circumstances. God’s power is often held in reserve. He promises and dispenses grace upon grace for the issues of life. Recognizing and growing in spiritual power should be a goal for the aging martial artist. We should know, due to age and maturity that without the Lord’s strength we can falter in the way. It is my prayer that as I age I will experience this reserved power of God as the source of strength for long term areas of living.

Instant power: Psalm 64:7 says, *“But God shall shoot at them with an arrow; suddenly shall they be wounded.”* Solomon wrote in Proverbs 6:15, *“Therefore shall his calamity come suddenly; suddenly shall he be broken without remedy.”* Not only do we experience long term trials and afflictions, but often issues of life come upon us quickly. Everything seems to be going well, and then, suddenly, we are confronted with the unexpected. To field instant spiritual power is really the immediate expression of the power that is already inherent in our lives because we are filled with God’s strength and Spirit.

Our quick and spiritually powerful response to any instant difficulty is a spiritual thermometer of our ongoing spiritual condition. It is my prayer to continue to experience His power, and that my actions would reflect that power, giving glory to Him.

Controlled power: The Apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:7, *“But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.”* I Corinthians 4:20, he wrote, *“For the kingdom of God is not in word, but in power.”*

The Lord indwells each believer with the Holy Spirit. It is the ministry of the Holy Spirit to comfort, strengthen, teach and empower each Christian. The necessity for this empowerment is experienced when we face events which we cannot control with any physical remedy. However, we do not have to be overcome by the events and circumstances of life. This is wonderfully seen in the Bible, where the Lord speaks to Zerubbabel saying, *“Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts.”* Zerubbabel, just like the rest of us, could never control or conquer every enemy or circumstance of life on his own. When needed, Zerubbabel need only to ask the One who has all might and power – the LORD of HOSTS.

Senior Goals and Personal Achievement Related to Power:

Instructors often reflect verbally, physically and emotionally their personal perspective as to what is most important in their teaching. Because of age, maturity, and higher rank the senior/chief instructor should convey to his students the critical nature of proper priorities for the art that he/she is teaching.

Subtle Power: Several years ago, Master Brad Whitlow visited Mid-California Taekwondo in Modesto, California for the first time. While performing some drills with Master Whitlow, I was amazed by the power that he demonstrated during our workout together. The movements he showed me seemed normal enough. However, when I experienced them, the movements were extremely powerful and significant. Initially, his power was subtle, but real, and then experienced. His demonstration of subtle power was a demonstration of true martial arts excellence in his life. This growth in each martial artist’s life should be critical for his continued advancement. In life, walking in subtle power is critical to our lives being powerful, controlled and mature.

Reserved power: Over the years I have watched numerous martial arts competitions, power demonstrations, and tournaments. Have you ever noticed someone who hyped themselves upon just prior to performing breaking techniques? I especially remember one YouTube video, when after great focus, slow practice movements, and deep breathing, the martial artist missed his target all together. In martial arts, there is an inherent desire to demonstrate power by breaking various sundry items. On several other occasions I have noticed the quietness of an older instructor. He was in his mid 60’s, with graying hair, and, as an 8th Dan Black Belt, he had been training for many years. He seemed cordial, humble and mysterious. As he began to perform his Japanese kata I was amazed at his level of power, although he did not seem to be putting forth much energy into his techniques. A short time later, as he approached the bricks and coconuts for his breaking demonstration, he appeared confident, but quiet in his approach. With grace and power he was able to smash through these objects in a manner which seemed effortless. His power was held in

reserve until it was needed to accomplish the task. This was a great lesson for any martial artist who paid close attention.

Instant power: The expression of power in any given technique is a desired quest for every martial artist. We train to achieve a level of power, which seems to go beyond some “normal” standard of life for the average person. This power is supposed to convey to the non martial artist some sense of mystery, and impress the general public. It is amazing the amount of power that the human body can generate. I have been amazed many times at the power demonstrated at testing and martial arts demonstrations. It seems, quite often, that those performing the power demonstrations seek only self-aggrandizement and ego. They muster up the power in some flashy way by breathing loudly, yelling, and generally psyching themselves into mysterious consciousness, all for the purpose of winning an event or defining their greatness. I believe that true power should be found in a quieter expression of inherent power which often lies dormant within the martial artist, waiting to be expressed in an explosive and controlled manner to accomplish the goal desired. This demonstrated instant power is based upon many concepts: a knowledge and application of mathematical principle ($\frac{1}{2}MV^2$), calmness of spirit, explosive speed, accuracy and control.

Controlled power: as Grand Master Robert Hardin taught on many occasions, “What good is power if you cannot strike your target?” I would like to add to that important statement, by saying, “What good is power and accuracy, if you cannot control the power you have been given”. Every strike is designed for a specific purpose. I personally believe that if we were placed in a position that required physical force we would evaluate the use of our power level in a controlled manner. Not every confrontation requires the use of “full power” to achieve a desired result. It seems that the goal of every technique would be to have the maximum power expressed at the correct location to achieve the desired result. Controlled power needs cultivation over years so that our art does not cause unnecessary injury to others. As a deputy sheriff in Los Angeles County, during the 1970s we were taught to progressively respond with force in any given situation, and escalate that force level when it became necessary. At times the force needed to accomplish a task required an immediate jump from verbal force to deadly force. However, most struggles do not lead to deadly force, but require force be applied in a controlled manner. This confident and mature handling of conflict shows that we have been well trained. In other words, we do not train to devastate every individual that we encounter, but we do train to facilitate a desired result during conflict.

Personal notes: Attitude of a Master Instructor:

Whether the goals of our lives are spiritual or physical, both are critical to our development. The Scripture teaches, *For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things*

that ye would (Galatians 5:16-17). Although the context of this passage is dealing with walking in the Spirit so that we remain moral and pure, the application for the physical realm is seen. If we are controlled only by the physical we become only physical agents and act apart from the spiritual realm and control. The “flesh” in the Bible is inherently evil, apart from the work of the Spirit. If we walk in the flesh, we lose the control provided by the Spirit, and we are then attracted to acting immorally without restraint. If the Spirit controls our flesh, we can walk through life in a more moral and noble manner, being directed by the Spirit. Of course, the Spirit referred to by the apostle is the Holy Spirit.

When Jesus went apart to pray, he left his disciples alone and asked them to watch and pray. After a time of prayer Jesus returned to His disciples and found them sleeping. It is recorded in the Scripture, *And he cometh unto the disciples, and findeth them asleep, and saith unto Peter, What, could ye not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak (Matthew 26:40-41).* This happened two times in the same setting. Each time Jesus returned to the disciples, He found that they once again asleep. He reminded them that the flesh is weak. The obvious lesson is that we must be strengthened spiritually to accomplish God-given tasks.

The purpose of this paper is to challenge us to walk on a higher level. As martial artists we are capable of great physical power and that is sometimes frightening. However, the Lord desires of us, is much greater.

May we never think that our martial art will physically provide every need in our life?

The study of any martial art is not just for the edification of the student, but for the edification of those that we influence for His honor.