

## BE LIKE WATER

*“Be water, my friend...”*

– Bruce Lee

A good martial artist must maintain a state of physical fluidity in order to be able to flow from one movement or action to another smoothly, easily, and without hesitation. At the same time they must maintain a state of mental fluidity in order to successfully adapt to and fit in with the opponent they are facing. Maintaining fluidity of both thought and action will allow them to find a way to reach the opponent by penetrating through or finding a way around an opponent's defenses, as well as avoiding an opponent's attacking force through either yielding to or dissolving it. In the vernacular of Bruce Lee, a good martial artist must “be like water.”

The ability to flow like water is one of the key tenets of Lee's philosophy. The water principle served as a foundation for his study of the martial arts, not only in the fluid movements of his body, but also in the way he maintained the absolute fluidity of his mind; never stagnating, always moving forward, growing and changing. Understanding the nature of water not only gave Lee the guiding principle for his martial art, but also a guiding principle for effective daily living. Flowing with life as opposed to trying to force things allowed Lee to fit in with whatever situation arose, and flow with any adversity until he was in the position to overcome it. The water principle was so much a part of Lee's philosophical outlook on martial art and life, that in an episode of the “*Longstreet*” television series that Lee guest starred in (as well as co-wrote with his student, screenwriter Stirling Silliphant) and which was entitled “*The Way of the Intercepting Fist*”, Lee's character attempts to impress the importance of maintaining fluidity upon the man he is teaching by telling him, “*Be formless, shapeless, like water. You put water into a cup, it becomes the cup. Put it into a teapot, it becomes the teapot. Now water can flow, or creep, or drip, or crash. Be water my friend.*” The point Lee was making to his student, who is trying to prepare to fight a local bully who had recently beaten him up, was that in the same way that water has no constant form, in combat there exist no constant conditions. Conditions can change from moment to moment, and in order for the man to be able to fit in and deal effectively with the bully, he must ‘be like water’ by remaining flexible and adaptable in order to flow with the situation.

Life is no different. Conditions are never constant. They can and do change from moment to moment. If we wish to flow effectively and have the ability to fit in with any situation, we need to “be like water” and maintain fluidity of both our thoughts and our actions. Let's look at the nature and characteristics of water and see how they can apply to ourselves:

- Water is an example of wholeness without form -- It has no shape of its own but instantly molds itself to the shape of whatever receptacle it is put in. If you pour it into a container, it takes the shape of the container. If water flows into a valley, it becomes the valley. In this way, water is flexible, adaptive, cooperative, not insisting

on its own way. Like water, we need to be flexible and cooperative to adapt ourselves to and fit in with whatever situation we find ourselves in.

- Water is the embodiment of both of pure Yin and Yang -- Nothing is more yielding or softer (Yin). If you hit it with your fist or attempt to cut it with a knife, nothing happens. If you try to squeeze a handful of it it will escape right through your fingers. Yet water also possesses incredible strength and is capable of penetrating the hardest forms of matter (Yang). There will be times when we may need to use softness and yield to what is happening, while at other times we may need to be strong and use firmness.
- Water is patient -- While it is one of the softest substances, over time it can erode the hardest rock by gently lapping away at it. Water may flow swiftly, or it may flow slowly, but its purpose is inexorable, its destiny sure. No matter what adversity you might be facing, you can flow with it until you are in a position to overcome it. Regardless of how difficult or hard a goal you wish to achieve might appear to be, through patience, perseverance, and steady, continual work, over time you can achieve it.
- Water ignores boundaries and obstacles; it chooses any way open to it, or creates one -- When water runs into an obstacle, it immediately begins to find a way to surmount it by going around it, over it, under it, or sometimes even through it. Sometimes our thoughts and actions can become “dammed up” or obstructed by such things as previous experiences we’ve had or our past conditioning if we allow them to. While negative events or obstacles might arise at some point in our life, we cannot remain stuck at that point or allow it to prevent us from continuing our forward movement. We have to immediately begin searching for a way to surmount or remove the obstacle. For example, when the door of Hollywood was closed to Bruce Lee, he turned the stumbling block into a stepping stone by simply flowing on to Southeast Asia and becoming such a success that the door to Hollywood not only had to re-open to him, but meet him on his terms this time. If you’re on a path toward a particular goal and you suddenly find an avenue closed or an obstacle blocking your way, immediately look for a way to surmount or circumvent the problem. If a door closes, find another way, but don’t lose sight of your goal or give up on it because that one path is only one path. There are countless other paths you can take. If something or someone is barring the way, find a way that is not barred. Refuse to allow anything or anyone to dam up or stop your flow.
- Water is clearest when it is calm -- When it is disturbed it can obscure everything from our sight. It’s impossible to clear muddied water by continually stirring it. Only by allowing the water to become calm again will clarity return. In the same way, if our thoughts or emotions become disturbed, our minds can become muddied and we may end up making mistakes or missing opportunities and possibilities because we are unable to see them. Only by taking the time to regain our calm will the disturbance disappear and our clarity of vision return. The Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu wrote, *“If water derives lucidity from stillness, how much more the faculties of the mind!”*
- Water can generate great force which can be utilized in either a positive or a negative way -- If the force is guided and directed properly it can generate power to help light an entire city. When it’s uncontrolled, turbulent and angry it can become a force of

destruction and inflict great damage, such as the tsunami that devastated Japan. Likewise, the energy we generate can be used in either a positive or a negative manner. We need to control and direct our energies, making sure that we are using them in a positive and constructive manner rather than destructively.

Lee's principle of "be like water" has recently found a unique new form of expression. His martial philosophy of fluid expression serves as one of the guiding principles behind the art of "Parkour" and its offshoot known as "Freerunning." Parkour, which originated in France, swept across Europe, and has now become popular amongst young people across the United States as well, has been defined as "the art of expressing yourself physically as you move across urban or natural spaces." It involves running on foot, moving on all four limbs like a cat, jumping, climbing, and other methods of catching yourself, grabbing hold of things, and hanging from things, rolling and balancing while interacting with obstacles, be they urban architecture such as buildings, stairwells, etc., or trees and rocks in a natural environment. The developers of Parkour adapted Lee's philosophy of developing intuitive movement and applied it to how a body can move across an urban space as freely and directly as possible. The aim of any Parkour or Freerunning practitioner is to travel from one point to another in the smoothest, most efficient way possible; to achieve a kind of physical flow. According to a British Freerunner nicknamed "Freeflow" *"The ultimate goal with freerunning is to be fluid, to attain flow -- to adapt to any given situation, so you never stop at obstacles -- you just keep flowing and find a way around them."*

### ***Conclusion***

For each of us, life is like a river upon which we are traveling. The river is constantly moving and constantly changing. Sometimes the current may be calm and flow smoothly, at other times it may move swiftly. We may encounter rock-strewn rapids and even waterfalls along the way. In order to adapt to the changing nature of the river and successfully navigate it, we must maintain fluidity of thought and action to "flow" with life, adapt and grow. By understanding and utilizing the water principle in everything we do we can become more effective in our daily lives. Finally, there's an adage that states, "Running water never grows stale." Water, whether it be in a river, a lake, or even an ocean, must keep moving, because if remains still it will stagnate. Life, like water, also requires continual movement, and we must remain in motion if we do not wish to stagnate. If we refuse or cease to flow with life, it will pass us by and we will become stagnant. So we've got to be like water and "keep on flowing."

### **Training Aids**

- Develop and maintain an attitude of flexibility and adaptability – Keep your mind, attitude and senses pliable and receptive -- Avoid any form of rigidity of thought, attitude and action.
- When you are angry, upset or confused, take the time to calm yourself and regain the clarity of your thoughts.
- Learn to "keep on flowing" without resistance.