

## Snake Oil

- Vince Morris 8th Dan.

Most of us share the very human characteristic of wanting to be well-thought of by our peers. I don't suffer from this affliction very much, but in my younger days as a PhD research student I had to be disabused of the practice of using inflated language, liberally peppered with Latin phrases - *'Mutatis mutandis'*, *'Ipso facto'* and convoluted hyperbole to somehow disguise my Grammar School education from my mostly privately educated peers, in an attempt to add *'gravitas'* (sorry) - a sense of weight and solidity - to my research.

In business, of course, the language of the advertisement has become so extremely devalued that everything you see is: *'The very latest'* - *'the best you can find!'* - *'Cannot be beaten!'* and so on. Especially in the largely ungoverned world of selling snake oil (oops - 'Health Products') untested, unregulated and probably ineffective substances are sold in vast quantities to a huge demand from would-be believers all over the world. As it is in the world outside, so it is in the world of Martial Arts, in both the East and the West, unscrupulous or plainly deluded Martial Arts teachers trick the unwary in order to gain reputation and hard cash!

Not everyone can be a World Champion. Having said that, this fairly mundane point seems to have escaped the notice of many of the 'world champions' to be found in so many martial artists' claims to fame. Highly inflated ranks are bought, sold and conferred and used to inflate the qualifications of numerous self-designated 'Masters' who can be found by even a simple internet search. I had one gentleman approach me recently with a view to becoming a Kissaki-Kai member, and his list of Ranks and qualifications took up 4 pages! In his mid-forties, He claimed four or five 10th Dans, a couple of 9th Dans, and a long list of 5th, 6th and 7th Dans in a variety of different Styles of Karate and also in some arts I have never heard of including 'Military' combat training and more of the same ilk.

For the life of me, I couldn't understand why such an elevated personage would even consider becoming a member of Kissaki-Kai, but, there it was. So, I gave the gentlemen my normal response to applicants; we are only able to consider membership for those recommended by official Kissaki-Kai instructors, or with whom we have met and trained personally. I felt in this case it would be an interesting experience to meet and perhaps exchange techniques with such an elevated martial artist and I invited him to the Dojo. Sadly, he never replied to my invitation!

Come on! Get real! Do these guys really think that any of us with a life-time of real martial experience would ever be duped by such transparent egoists?

Apparently so. Even more sad is the fact that they are not entirely wrong! I can list more than a few 'Masters' and 'Grand Masters' who have by trickery, chicanery and deception carved out a long careers and pockets full of money by just these methods of selling *'snake oil'* to those who desperately want to believe - even in spite of the evidence to the contrary. I am also convinced that more than a few of these exponents - who may have legitimate qualifications in other areas - are so self-deluded that they do actually believe their own hype!

How many martial arts students have fallen for the sales pitch of 'Increase the power of your Chi (or KI) or Internal Energy' as trumpeted across cyberspace or the small ads in magazines? 'Destroy your enemy with no-touch knock-outs, Blast your attackers with bolts of invisible energy.' Highly appealing to many, who are looking for the 'magic bullet'. No-one seems at all disenchanted by considering how such claims can be tested. How do you measure the gains you have purportedly made in developing your internal power when you can't measure it in the first place? How do you 'see' the results of your 'invisible' Chi? You can't measure it in any scientific way known to Man. The only possible arbiter is the person him or herself in a purely unscientific and anecdotal fashion, completely under the influence of a myriad swirl of personal wishes, beliefs, mistaken perceptions and a lighter wallet.

But how do they do it? To inculcate any belief at all, the deluded marks (*sorry - potential students*) must surely have some evidence to base their hope upon?

Well - there are a few things to consider here. The first is humanities' urge to believe in something greater than itself. Since the beginning of the human race, it seems that our brains are conditioned to look for (or create) patterns or find causal relationships in



Master Harada (Shotokai) bounces Steve Hope (one of his senior students) into the air with his invisible force shield!

the information fed into our brains, to try to make sense of the exterior world. This led inexorably to the creation of a hidden world of Gods and Goddesses and even natural objects being accorded spiritual dimensions, i.e. Religion; a characteristic state in which the basic tenet is the need to have 'Faith' in the invisible, untouchable, unknowable, omniscient .... (you go on with it).. and a complete absence of any scientific proof whatsoever.

In personal, human terms, so many of us would really like there to be 'something more' and be able to look forward without fear to a continuing existence after our mortal days are done.

This isn't the place to enter into a discourse upon the believability or not of Religion, except that it does have a bearing upon the actions and longevity of these pseudo martial arts 'Masters.'

How so? To a Viking warrior, a terrifying lightning strike is easily believable as a weapon of Thor - he knows nothing of meteorological electrical forces! To a Neanderthal, the I-phone would be an inexplicable miracle! To Early Man, a Zippo lighter would be an object of veneration and worship! The third of Arthur C. Clarke's Three Laws: "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic" states the case succinctly, and is equally appropriate in the Hokum world of Religion as it is in the 'Woo Woo' world of the proponents of 'Ki' or 'Chi' in the martial arts.



**'Master' Jacques-Jean Quero demonstrates how he is impervious to sword strikes as a blow delivered by one of his students not only bounced off but tosses the student to the ground many feet away! (Give me the sword!)**

Is there any evidence of connections here? Absolutely!

There are similarities in the art of the Sensei or Sifu and of

the charismatic preacher/evangelist. In both areas there are long 'histories' and much anecdotal evidence to support the claims made. And what are these claims? That in both there is an invisible power (spirit) which can be cultivated and utilized to the benefit of those who give their unstinting and unquestioning support and money (fees, donations etc.) to the dynamic host who can apparently demonstrate unbelievable physical results from just the power of his invisible force!

I point out here, by the way, that the longevity of a belief has no bearing whatsoever upon its veracity! Those that claim that **'Chinese medicine has a long history therefore it must be genuine'** explain that the 'Huang Di Neijing' (Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon), is an ancient Chinese text which is the source for Traditional Chinese Medicine. This was actually written (compiled) over a span of many hundreds of years. The earliest mention of this was in Hanshu (Book of Han) written in 111 CE, however, the main content was written between 500 and 800 CE, with final revisions being completed in the 11th century CE.

This text described 'Qi' a supposed life force, which travels along invisible channels running through the body that were associated with diagnosis and treatment. These may have inspired the idea of meridians as utilized by modern acupuncturists, but the term meridian was not invented until 1939 and these channels were not used for the insertion of needles as in acupuncture, but for bloodletting and lancing and draining infection! Belief in the effectiveness of acupuncture is just as unscientific as the earlier belief in Bloodletting as a therapeutic regime which had just as many believers. The idea of invisible energy circulation was introduced by a French bank clerk, George Soulie de Morant, born in Paris in 1879, who spent years in China and was much impressed by Traditional Chinese Medicine. He never had any medical qualifications, by the way.

On his return to France he began to publish books on Acupuncture and here begins the problem, De Morant himself admitted that he translated 'qi' as 'energy', **"for lack of a better word."** The notion of a meridian system outside of the vasculature was also a creation of Monsieur Morant. The length of time a belief has endured is no deciding factor as to its truth!

In much the same way as in early China, in the West since the time of Hippocrates (c. 460-377 B.C) it was believed that a healthy

body depended upon maintaining the balance of four 'Humours,' of Yellow Bile, Black Bile, Phlegm and Blood.

Unlike acupuncture, and the balance of Chi, this concept - with its concomitant treatment Blood-letting - has fallen out of favor in the light of subsequent medical discoveries and knowledge, even though it also had many centuries of being considered a medical fact and was attested to by both Doctors and their patients!

The National Council Against Health Fraud states: *"Acupuncture's theory and practice are based on primitive and fanciful concepts of health and disease that bear no relationship to present scientific knowledge."*

Chinese medicine in origin is quite remarkable for the way in which it viewed its task in holistic terms, and it was very effective. However its core concept of 'Qi': *"Bears no resemblance to the Western concept of 'Energy'"* (Dr. Andreas Schwerte - Understanding Acupuncture.) *"The 'Energy' - 'Meridians Theory' introduced by Soulie de Morant in the late 1920s was the biggest translation error carried out in modern history befalling acupuncture and Chinese medicine ."*(op. cit.)

So -there is no credible scientific validity whatsoever for either Qi or 'No Touch' knockouts and invisible energy strikes!

Has any of the science-based findings done anything to stem the proliferation of acupuncturists and chiropractics with their 'Sub-luxations' offering (for a fee) aid to sufferers? No. The problem with pain and suffering is that it forces sick people to turn to anyone who offers hope of the alleviation of symptoms, and the louder and more extravagant the claims, then the greater the belief inculcated in the practitioner.

So where is the similarity with pseudo-religious scams taking us? In a film called **"Captive Minds: Hypnosis and Beyond,"** produced by the National Film Board of Canada you can see a line of people leading from the floor of an auditorium to a platform towards the main protagonist, as mellow music plays in the background. Our hero speaks a few words to each person, then vigorously presses his thumb in the middle of each one's forehead, while speaking in a foreign tongue and instructing the victim: "Breathe! Breathe!" Instantly the person drops to the floor, seemingly unconscious. The speaker goes from one to the next down the line, occasionally directing a person off to the side, but otherwise having the same effect on each one. Before long bodies are lying all over the platform.

This is not a martial arts seminar, but the performance of a stage hypnotist in Quebec. The film shows a line of people coming forward to be hypnotized as part of the hypnotist's public performance. The people clearly want to be hypnotized. In addition, they believe in the hypnotist's ability. The hypnotist judges a few as not sufficiently susceptible, and shunts them off to the side while he moves on to the next person. Then, just as described, he simply presses his thumb on the middle of each person's forehead and the person slides or falls to the floor immediately hypnotized.

The similarities are striking: In both groups (martial arts students and religious believers) the individuals have committed much time to their selected goals, they have paid (often large sums) in fees or 'offerings' - they have a vested interest in obtaining a positive outcome (martial skill or better health) they have great confidence in the 'Master' or 'Preacher' who is always charismatic and forceful in presenting their patter.



**White clad, authority figure Charismatic preacher Benny Hinn performs his 'knock-out' party tricks on the *selected* ranks of his believers and drops them helpless to the ground! Notice any martial arts similarities here?**

There are also other factors at work; in some people there is a great aversion to being in the public gaze if contradicting such an impressive figure, in others the desire to believe, in concert with the particular sounds, sights and persuasive concomitants of the occasion truly inculcates a state of hypnotic suggestion.



Trick No. 4 - The positive and negative positions.

Derren Brown who has written books for magicians and the general public, revealing the 'secrets' of mind-readers and spiritualists as well as charismatic preachers in a TV program (Messiah 7 January 2005) - concluded that people tend to hear only things that support their own ideas and ignore contradictory evidence; known in psychology as confirmation bias. In a 2nd program (Fear and Faith 2012) Brown examined the psychology of religious belief. Reproducing a number of well-known psychology experiments, he showed how even non-believers can be susceptible to suggestions of a supernatural or religious nature. So, to the point - how do they do it?

First inculcate a sense of expectancy; gather around you an enthusiastic coterie of those who are in your pay or hope for some reflected glory or even a rank commensurate with presenting their own seminars and making money for themselves.



Spend some time looking up articles and books by stage strongmen who openly reveal their tricks. On the left you can see an illustration from Pearsons Magazine (June 1899) by one E. Barton-Wright in which he shows how by the simple application of known physical laws it is possible to hoodwink an audience in believing that you possess supernatural powers.



In the martial arts, Aikido 'Master' Koichi Tohei in his 1961 book 'Aikido in Daily Life' shows photos of himself performing similar tricks and making the claim that they are manifestations of his command of the mysterious power of 'Ki.' The fact that these parlor tricks are easily copied and explained by Strongmen and other stage performers as natural physical laws seems to make no difference, as, plainly, Occam's Razor doesn't fit in with his grandiose claims of possessing a magical invisible force - which he can teach you to utilize, thus gaining money and reputation!

A good feat to master is that of lying flat with only your head and feet supported, whilst having one or more person sit upon your midriff. This can be claimed to demonstrate the power of Ki infusing the body whereas it is simply basic laws of Physics.

Koichi Tohei also shows (above) exactly this trick in his 'Aikido In Daily Life' (pp.48, 49) and acknowledges that hypnotists can also do the trick, but only whilst in a deep hypnotic sleep. Clearly this is completely untrue, as anyone with a reasonable degree of strength can do it, and one little hint: *The closer together are the supports, the greater the weight which can be supported.*



Line Dancing in La La Land.



(Lft.) Master' Dillman Hides behind a sheet and moves' his acolytes with an invisible 'Chi' blast which he claims are "radio waves!"

Another favorite of the charlatans: Line up half a dozen or more students (they do have to be students) whilst the master stands apart, sometimes behind a screen, and with a few waves of the hands he creates an invisible ball of energy which he launches at the person in the front of the line, who, as if electrocuted, stumbles away, launches himself into the air or otherwise creates confusion and imbalance in the line. It doesn't matter if the 'master' is visible to the line up or not, as the students know what to expect and will react appropriately.

Make the performance even more dramatic by enlisting the faithful to immediately rush *en masse* to the aid of the fallen victim and make a great fuss of sitting him up, crossing his legs, slapping the back of his neck, pulling on his finger tips whilst claiming that you are unblocking his meridians and saving him from the dangerous condition of having unbalanced Ki.

The medical truth that the best way to deal with an unconscious patient is certainly not to do more than check airways and perhaps move him into the recovery position, is oh so boring and would add nothing to the theater of the situation!

Then you do have to be able to quickly defend the failure of these circus tricks whenever they are attempted upon anyone except your own (or your buddies') students, as fail they most certainly will.



Take the example of perhaps the best known self-publicist in the martial art of BS, one George Dillman.

Here we see him attempting to explain the failure of one of his acolytes, Leon Jay, to have any effect at all when trying to effect a 'no-touch' KO to someone NOT his student. Why didn't it work? Because the 'victim' didn't believe in it, or was touching the roof of his mouth with his tongue, or raising and lowering his big



toes; all of which apparently nullify the invisible strikes! - which he now claims are 'Radio Waves.'



'Master' Jaques-Jean again (left) continuing in the footsteps of all those misrepresenting the application of well-understood physical laws as mysterious manifestations of internal invisible forces which not only defy attempts to unbalance him but enable him to, at a touch, make *his student* hurtle backwards into the air!

Now, to be clear - Right from the early times in Japanese Martial Arts we find diagrams depicting the Kyusho or 'Vital' (vulnerable) points indicating the areas of the human body which are significantly effective in some people and extremely effective in others. These areas can be struck or manipulated to bring about pain, and weaknesses in stance or structure, or even unconsciousness. Many of these 'points' are associated with accessible nerve junctions or areas which can directly affect the motor system or the brain function. But these effects are well-understood in terms of western medicine, and never depend upon some mysterious, invisible force.

I am a firm believer in the effectiveness of attacking the vulnerable areas of the human body, but each and every strike and manipulation is explicable by modern scientific knowledge of human anatomy and physiology.



Here I directly attack the trachea (or 'conception vessel number 22') to induce a reflex gagging reaction and physical withdrawal. A useful Kyusho strike with potentially lethal consequences.

Is all this really important? Well - historically - belief in the invisible shield of Iron Shirt Kung Fu certainly cost thousands of lives in the Boxer Rebellion in China between 1897 and 1901. "Boxer" was an appellation derived from the martial arts practices that were widely undertaken by the rebels in the belief that they afforded physical invulnerability to injury in combat - even that they would be impervious to bullets! Although this belief did promote a lack of fear in the ranks, the truth was that they died in their thousands in their reckless charges.

Today, of course, I doubt that many still adhere to such outlandish beliefs, but in the world of Martial Arts we can still see those who claim imperviousness to kicks and punches and even blows from staffs and swords! They still gain adherents, make money and build a reputation on such fraudulent hocus pocus! If any of them want to contradict me, they have a simple challenge - *hand me the sword!*

Rt. 'Master' Dillman stops a kick with his invisible shield of Ki power. The kick never lands and the acolyte explains that it felt as if George had stopped it with his hand.

*George.. Try to stop one of my kicks!*



What we see in both the areas of religion and martial arts is not so very far removed from similar tenets of faith. The same search for extra-ordinary powers, the same vesting of trust in the most unscrupulous of teachers and preachers, the same expense of time and money in following a particular master or minister, the same self-delusion when faced with the complete lack of evidence for their beliefs..

All this should be anathema to all seekers after truth, in both the religious and the martial worlds.

Why would you need "Faith" if you already had scientific evidence?

In Zen terms, *Mizu no kokoro* - to have a mind or heart like water, reflecting like a mirror a true vision of reality, unruffled by egoism and desire. Martial artists should be engaged in a process of polishing the mirror, to see all things as they truly are, not obfuscated by personal desire, ambition or need.

So, it is important that in a finite world with each of us having only a finite time to spend within it, we should seek the truth as best we can, and firmly put away such silly distractions. We will all be the richer - in both metaphysical and physical terms - for the so doing!

Having expounded the Oriental point of view, I end with one of Western philosophy's most accurate observations:

" A fool and his money are soon parted!"

**Vince Morris 8th Dan Kissaki-Kai. New Jersey. September 2013. ©**

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