

Sword and Spirit

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The “Ghost Hole”

Why Ordinary Missteps Reveal the Science Behind High-Level Off-Balancing

There is an experience almost everyone has had, although few people have stopped to examine what actually happened. You are walking at a normal pace, and your foot catches an uneven section of pavement. You step from a curb expecting the street to be slightly higher than it is. You put your foot down on a small stone and the ankle rolls just enough to make the entire body buckle. Sometimes nothing more than a shallow depression in the ground is required. For a fraction of a second, the support you expected simply is not where your body calculated it would be. Your weight has already been committed, your other leg has already surrendered part of its responsibility for supporting you, and your body is moving into a space that suddenly does not provide what you expected. The result can be surprisingly dramatic.

When my son was younger, they had an expression for this kind of thing. They called it a “ghost hole.” Someone would be running, skating, jumping, or moving quickly across uneven ground when suddenly the person would go tumbling. From a distance, you might not even see what caused it. There had been no collision and no obvious obstacle. The person simply collapsed as though something invisible had reached out and interfered with the movement. Hence the name. It looked as though a ghost had pushed them.

The expression was humorous, but the physical event behind it was quite real. More importantly for the martial artist, the ghost hole provides an unusually good way of understanding *kuzushi*, the sophisticated technique of off-balancing an opponent.

I have encountered considerable skepticism whenever people see demonstrations in which someone loses balance without an obvious throw, sweep, or large application of muscular force. The immediate accusation is often that the recipient is cooperating, exaggerating, or simply throwing himself to the ground. Certainly, fraudulent demonstrations exist, and martial artists should retain enough intellectual discipline to question what they see. Skepticism, however, stops being useful when it becomes an automatic refusal to investigate observable mechanics.



We already know from ordinary life that human beings can be profoundly destabilized by very small changes in the conditions beneath them.

Consider stepping off a curb. Most adults can step from a six-inch curb thousands of times without giving the action any thought. The nervous system estimates the distance, the supporting leg manages the descent, the advancing foot searches for the ground, and the body organizes itself around an expected point of contact. Change that distance unexpectedly, however, and something interesting happens. Anyone who has ever believed there was one more stair when there wasn't, or believed they had reached the bottom when another step remained, knows the peculiar jolt that follows. The discrepancy may only be a few inches, yet those few inches are enough to disturb the organization of the entire body.

A small stone offers another example. A pebble weighs almost nothing compared with the person stepping on it. It cannot overpower the leg. It cannot generate enough independent force to throw an adult human being.

Nevertheless, place that stone beneath the wrong part of the foot at the wrong instant and a person weighing two hundred pounds can suddenly stagger, buckle, or fall. The stone did not supply the power for the fall. The moving person did.



That distinction is central to understanding high-level off-balancing.

A moving human body contains mass, momentum, direction, expectation, and commitment. When we walk, we continually surrender and recover balance. Walking is not a succession of perfectly stable postures. The body moves beyond one base of support while another is being established. We perform this operation so effortlessly that we rarely recognize how much coordination it requires. The foot arrives where the nervous system expects it to arrive, the ground provides resistance, the joints organize themselves, and the next movement begins. Much of what we call balance therefore depends upon successful predictions about what will happen a fraction of a second later.

This is where the ghost hole becomes more than an amusing expression from the past. It becomes a useful model.

Suppose I do not attempt to throw a person in the conventional sense. Instead, I interfere with the support that his movement expects to encounter. He begins to step, turn, pivot, reach, withdraw, or advance. His body has already made certain commitments to that action. If I can alter his structure during that commitment, prevent the



expected support from becoming useful, or redirect his mass slightly beyond the position from which he can comfortably recover, I can create something functionally similar to the hole in the pavement. There is no actual hole beneath his foot, but his body encounters the same problem. It committed itself toward a condition that is no longer available.

I call this the Ghost Hole Principle.

The principle can be defined as the creation of a moment in which a person's body commits weight, structure, or momentum toward support that has become mechanically unavailable or unreliable. The disappearance of that support does not necessarily mean removing the foot from the ground. A foot can remain firmly planted while becoming useless as an effective base. A hip can be positioned so that it can no longer accommodate the incoming load. A shoulder can be turned sufficiently to change the organization of the spine. The head can be displaced relative to the pelvis. The timing of a step can be interrupted. The relationship between the feet can be changed just enough that the body has nowhere comfortable to place the next increment of force.

None of these things require supernatural power. They require timing, position, sensitivity, and an understanding of how human beings move.

Newton's first law gives us part of the larger picture. A body in motion tends to remain in motion unless acted upon by an external force. Human movement is more complicated than a simple physics demonstration because we are constantly generating internal forces and making neurological corrections, but momentum remains enormously important. Once a person has begun moving in a particular direction, the practitioner does not necessarily need to create all of the energy required to move that person. Sometimes the more intelligent task is to interfere with the body's ability to manage the energy it has already created.

This is why sophisticated off-balancing can look suspiciously effortless.

The observer expects to see force proportional to the visible result. If one person falls hard, the observer expects the other person to have performed an equally dramatic action. Everyday experience tells us that this expectation is



false. The person who steps into a shallow depression may fall violently even though the depression produced no force of its own. The person whose ankle rolls over a stone may crash to the pavement even though the stone barely moved. Someone who misjudges the final stair can experience a startling full-body collapse because the anticipated support arrived several inches later than expected.

The martial question is therefore straightforward. If naturally occurring changes in height, angle, friction, timing, and support can produce these reactions accidentally, can we study the conditions and reproduce aspects of them deliberately?

I believe we can, and this has been part of my work for many years. The laboratory for studying it does not begin with spectacular throwing techniques. It begins with walking. Have someone walk naturally and study precisely when each foot accepts weight. Watch the pelvis during a turn. Observe what happens to the shoulders when someone changes direction unexpectedly. Pay attention to the instant between lifting one foot and establishing it somewhere else. Study how little interference is necessary when movement has already begun compared with how much force may be necessary when someone is standing squarely, deliberately braced, and waiting to resist you.



Then begin creating the conditions.

Do not ask the training partner to fall. That defeats the purpose of the experiment. Have the person walk, step, turn, reach, pivot, and change direction. Introduce controlled structural disturbances at different moments and observe which ones the body absorbs easily, and which ones produce disproportionate instability. The goal is not theatrical compliance. The goal is reproducibility. If a principle is genuine, we should be able to examine it, alter variables, experience failure, make corrections, and produce the effect again.

This distinction matters because I have no interest in defending bad martial arts merely because they are labeled advanced. If a practitioner requires a cooperative recipient who knows exactly when and how to fall, skepticism is warranted. High-level skill should survive intelligent examination. The answer to fraudulent demonstrations is not to conclude that subtle off-balancing is impossible. The answer is to become considerably more rigorous about how we test it.

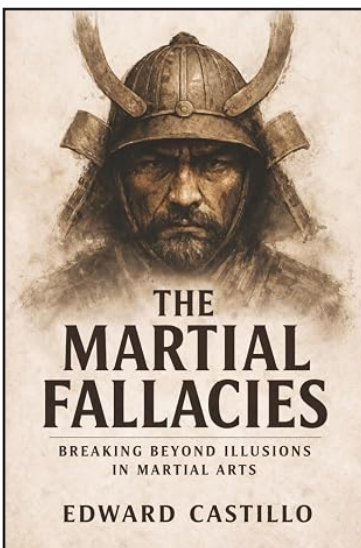
The ghost hole gives us a familiar place to begin because nature has already conducted the experiment millions of times. Human beings stumble over stones. We misjudge curbs. We step into depressions. We slip on wet floors. We expect another stair. We turn while our weight is committed somewhere inconvenient. In each case, a relatively small environmental change can produce a surprisingly large disruption because the environment interferes with a body that is already moving.

Advanced off-balancing begins with recognizing the same vulnerability and learning to work with it deliberately.

The practitioner does not always need to become the force that throws the opponent. Sometimes the more refined skill is creating the missing piece of ground, the unreliable support, the mistimed step, or the compromised structure that allows the opponent's own movement to become difficult to recover from. For one brief instant, the body expects the world to be somewhere that it is not.

That is the Ghost Hole. 🌀

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Martial Fallacies is a nonfiction analytical work examining the technical, psychological, and cultural misconceptions that persist within martial arts practice and instruction. Written for experienced practitioners and instructors rather than beginners, the book focuses on patterns of stagnation that emerge when tradition, repetition, and inherited systems are accepted without critical examination.

The work explores many of the assumptions that shape contemporary martial culture, including the belief that form guarantees function, that lineage establishes legitimacy, and that the accumulation of techniques constitutes mastery.

