

Sword and Spirit

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— Benefits of Budo —

Regardless of the times in which you live, or the circumstances of your life, success largely depends on things you can control:

- Building a foundation of strong relationships in a community of mutual support and achievement.
- Forging a disciplined and positive mindset.
- Enhancing your physical health and capabilities.

These are exactly the benefits membership in an authentic dojo provides.

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Want for Nothing

For Christmas this year I received a copy of *Kodansha*'s stunningly beautiful and historically faithful reproduction of Miyamoto Musashi's *Book of Five Rings* in scroll form (I didn't even know such gorgeous replicas existed). Thus equipped, I started the new year by resuming an age-old hunt for that most elusive of treasures—the power of the Void ("From the Void—Power!").

When confronting a mystery of such proportions, the first question must be whether there is any point at all in trying to grasp it. Is it like trying to picture a fourth physical dimension—simply beyond the reach of the human mind? Perhaps not, and much more important than what I think about the subject is the map left behind by Musashi while contemplating the ultimate void during his final years spent meditating in the *Reigendo* cave.

As a threshold matter, Musashi did make the effort to reduce this arcane concept to writing in the fifth and final scroll of his seminal work on strategy. Not only that, but the kanji he chose to express it—**空** (ku), as opposed to the more common 無 (mu)—evolved from pictograms representing the practical act of chiseling out an empty space in the rock, as opposed to the latter, which was spawned by a far more mysterious ritual for summoning forces beyond human understanding. Accordingly, the master swordsman was telling us that his conception of the Void can be approached using the right tools.

When confronting a challenge of this magnitude and complexity, the advice of another wise mentor comes to mind: "*There are few problems that can't be tackled with faith, plenty of paper and pencils, and a full pot of coffee.*" So, with the guidance of several masters in hand, let's at least try to figure out what the Void isn't; what it's like; and what signs to watch out for.

Here goes nothing (quite literally):

• **Analogy:** One very powerful tool when approaching the unknown is reasoning by analogy ("*By knowing things that exist, you can know that which does not exist. That is the void.*"). We know, for example, how hard it is to explain the concept of *ki* (or *chi*), to new practitioners of martial arts, but we also know of a few exercises that can help them at least inch their way toward this elusive concept.



♦ WHERE NOT TO SEEK

Let us begin with a quick survey of what the Void isn't:

- **Not What You Know:** We will not find the answers we are seeking in conventional learning ("The Void is not included in man's knowledge"). While they may contain echoes and allusions, no single kata, no technique, no drill will deliver us all the way to our destination.

- **Not What You Don't Know:** Nor does the Void simply encompass things of which we are aware, but which we have not yet mastered—what one former Secretary of Defense famously described as, "*the known unknowns*" ("People in this world look at things mistakenly, and think that what they do not understand must be the void. This is not the true void. It is bewilderment.").

- **Not What You See:** We will not even find the Void in any orthodox conception of reality ("Worldly things are illusionary."). There's no point looking in the common places.

♦ WHERE TO SEEK

Let's continue by examining some of the signposts that past masters have left for us, pointing in the general direction of the Void:

- **Take Away:** It is difficult, if not impossible, to grasp the idea of nothingness ("What is called the spirit of the void is where there is nothing... Of course the void is nothingness."). Sort of like trying not to imagine a pink elephant. An easier analogue to grapple with initially might be the concept of absence. One way to approach the conundrum of the Void is to consider how the *subtraction*, rather than the *addition*, of certain factors can improve performance. Eradicate fear. Remove hesitation. Eliminate overthinking. Ignore distraction. Resist illusion. Eliminate.

Michelangelo's *David* is widely considered to be one of the most exquisite works of art ever created. The maestro, however, said of his masterpiece: "*I simply saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free,*" meaning that he viewed the task of the sculptor as chipping away the excess stone to reveal the figure that was already there all along...

The idea of creating art by *subtraction* rather than through *addition* may seem like an odd notion at first, especially in the realm of martial practice, where students are encouraged to memorize and perfect technique after technique, form after form, and principle after principle.

But the concepts described in the ultimate section of Musashi's *magnum opus*—are entirely consistent with this approach. Like many martial scholars, Musashi begins his book with a variety of lessons describing the right way to perform various postures, attitudes, techniques, and forms, but in the fifth and final section of the work—the Void—he explains that most, if not all, of these specifics must eventually be left behind.

- **Do Less:** Paradoxically, the accepted idea of trying harder must also be dispensed with. You can't capture the Void through sheer force of will ("Attaining the principle of the Void means not attaining it."). In fact, don't consciously try at all ("The No Design, No Conception cut: In this method, when the enemy attacks and you also decide to attack, hit with your body, and hit with your spirit, and hit from the Void with your hands, accelerating strongly."). Sometimes, it seems, we can achieve more by doing less.

- **What You Sense:** If we cannot look to outward appearances and worldly wisdom in our quest, then where should we focus our attention? One answer appears to be on nature. Approaching the Void requires channeling the natural and eternal rhythms of the universe ("When you appreciate the power of nature, knowing rhythm of any situation, you will be able to hit the enemy naturally and strike naturally. All this is the Way of the Void... The Void has no beginning and no end."). Mother Nature's intuition typically exceeds our own by several orders of magnitude. She is also wont to give subtle signs to those who are on the lookout for their existence. Closely related to—and perhaps even part of—harmonizing with nature is adopting a what Musashi calls, "a broad view" ("Then you will come to think of things in a wide sense and, taking the void as the Way, you will see the Way as void."). This is in some ways reminiscent of what soldiers sometimes refer to as, "*the thousand yard stare.*"



♦ HOW WILL I KNOW?

How will we know when we are nearing our destination?

• **What You Feel:** Entry into the Void should bring with it a sense of total clarity (“*When your spirit is not in the least clouded, when the clouds of bewilderment clear away, there is the true void.*”). Like true love, if you have to ask if this is the feeling, it isn’t. Related to this—in fact, possibly its cause—is a sensation of total integrity/integration (“*In the void is virtue, and no evil. Wisdom has existence, principle has existence, the Way has existence, spirit is nothingness.*”). Centuries of experience teach that one man with right on his side can defeat legions.

• **Spirit:** Whether or not we participate in organized religion, the way to the Void requires a level of spiritual connection, both within ourselves and with the opponent. (“*Holding down a shadow occurs when you can see the enemy’s attacking spirit... when the enemy embarks on an attack, if you make a show of strongly suppressing his technique, he will change his mind. Then, altering your spirit, defeat him by forestalling him with a Void spirit... Many things are said to be passed on. Sleepiness can be passed on, and yawning can be passed on. Time can be passed on also. In large-scale strategy, when the enemy is agitated and shows an inclination to rush, do not mind in the least. Make a show of complete calmness, and the*

enemy will be taken by this and will become relaxed. When you see that this spirit has been passed on, you can bring about the enemy’s defeat by attacking strongly with a Void spirit.”). The Void must be approached by a spiritual path.

• **A Higher Power:** Another wise master, well acquainted with the Void, shared this piece of wisdom with his students: “*You don’t steer life like a car; you surf it like a board.*” When you get the distinct feeling that you are not driving the action so much as *being driven*, it suggests that you may be drawing near to your destination (“*You win battles with the timing in the Void born of the timing of cunning by knowing the enemies’ timing, and thus using a timing which the enemy does not expect.*”). Some professional athletes call this, “*entering the Flow state.*” It is difficult, if not impossible, to possess such special moments, for they do not come from within you, at least not entirely. Rather, they are fleeting experiences of sharing energy with the Universe that are to be savored and treasured.

And perhaps this is the point. Maybe, like Dr. Jones’ cinematic quest for the Holy Grail, the Void is not a prize that a person can possess, but a place he can—with wisdom, faith, and virtue—visit from time-to time...

Truthfully, I’m not sure about any of this, so if you ever get there, please drop me a line... ☺

Peter Hobart has been a devoted student of the martial arts since his father—a Golden Gloves Champion—first introduced him to the sweet science as a child. Since then, he has lived in many different states and countries, and in each place, he has sought out, and been fortunate to find, some of the world’s finest teachers. His connection with Itten Dojo began as a commuting student in the early 1990s, flourished following a move to Central Pennsylvania (which he tells his wife had nothing to do with the location of the dojo), and continues in a variety of ways to this day. He currently lives in Northern Virginia, works for the government, and manages to write, train, and teach on the side just enough to ensure that it hurts every time!

