

*Short and long term effects of natural sharpness and hateful aggression,
and their uses in the spiritual development of human society*

- Reeve Leaford, June 2019

Nearly ten years of study in a martial arts dedicated to spiritual growth as much as physical strength and energy have led to an interesting and fulfilling young adulthood. It is very difficult to say what kind of life I would be leading if I hadn't visited the Hurstbridge Scout Hall on a whim, simply because of the scale of and depth of effect that the dojo has had on my life and emotional and mental state. I am endlessly thankful that the dojo was around as it was, and that it gave me the tools (in the form of a teacher to lead, a place to be comfortable, peers to train and learn with and students to ask questions) to allow me to better understand my own sense of self and my relationship with those close and the world at large. Many things came and went but I was always happy to have the dojo there in the background, always welcoming and accepting regardless of whatever else may have been happening. As Sylph Sensei always says, all you have to do is continue to show up.

Though there were and still will be times of difficulty where even showing up seemed to be a struggle, I have always found that showing up anyway ended any doubts or reservations, and as soon as I was on the mats, most outside thoughts quietened and allowed room for class. Even though nearly a decade has passed I still barely consider myself started on this road I have found myself on, though I do always tend to pace my way through things. I am incredibly grateful for my peers who have shown me through many difficult techniques, both past and present. Andrew and Will, and especially Ruari, will always be people who I looked to when I needed to figure out what the hell I was doing. Various multi-hour chats have, I think, helped me prepare for this essay, which will explore concepts of natural violence and sharpness compared to aggression and hateful acts of violence, how they differ and what causes and results surround them.

Animals hunt and kill, and have done so for thousands of years. They evolved claw and tooth to keep themselves alive and to continue their lineage. Their use of violence is almost always in regard to feeding themselves or defending themselves. When an animal hunts or defends, the short term goal is that they and their children survive and are able to continue thriving. As living beings, their nature is to live, at almost any cost. Violence could also be thought of as damage or destruction in general; a mountain stream carves a valley, even volcanoes/tsunami/hurricane. These acts are typically responsive and only occur because of a greater threat or cause, or are naturally forming events in the world. We may view or classify them as dangerous or violent, but really it is just the world acting as it always has been. We respond to violence in ways that we have been conditioned to. If we are taught that all violence is naturally "evil" or a bad thing, we may

decide that a rose is evil for having thorns, despite that fact that we had to pick it up to be hurt by it. It would be of tremendous use to the world for people to know that all sharpness has a reason and cause, many of which are perfectly natural and are happening without us knowing all the time. If we were to believe that the whole world was out to harm us, this may cause us to develop aggressive behaviour in response to things that are purely reactionary, leading to an unfortunate feedback loop. If one can determine the kind of sharpness presented, it becomes much easier to deal with. This requires a dynamic and perceptive mind and a practiced mindset of openness and willingness to understand. This is the hallmark of a person who finds that life tends to be much kinder to them.

A dynamic world requires constant change and development of ideas and beliefs, and a measure of growth for humans would be the ability to adapt to these new scenarios, knowing when to apply effort and when to allow themselves to relax and be swept along. Knowing that change is inevitable and that it is ok to be transient. Locking yourself to a single belief or desire may be favourable for a time, but eventually, things will change, leading to the choice to keep steady or change with it. This is analogous with Hastumi-soke's description of 'ninja wind'. Sometimes the wind blows favourably and the best course is to ride it wherever it blows, and sometimes it is best to sit and wait for a more advantageous breeze. He usually accompanies questions on the matter with a joke about a different kind of 'wind', reminding others of the importance of good humour, and the ability to take a joke. This all comes back to the mental state of giving, malleability and fluidity. Laughter is a relaxing exhalation, which is difficult to achieve when your natural state is tension. Remaining firm can have advantages in some scenarios but is usually not an effective long term state of mind, as it becomes brittle and loses integrity.

Firmness can take the form of pointedness and sharpness, either directed forward aggressively or passively bunkered down. Sharpness itself is not directly harmful, it is only when force is applied does pain or injury occur. This force can come from either the outside pushing in, or from the source of pointedness itself moving out. We often consider someone pushing their own pointedness as being "aggressive" or attacking, while someone who has their pointedness pushed against is perhaps thought to be defending themselves. The "attacker" or the person with more obvious "sharpness" is usually seen as being ethically in the wrong. This can lead to particular people being vilified simply for reacting appropriately to a less obvious instigator. Unfortunately, this leads to a sharp but passive individual being worn down by worry and becoming afraid to stand strong, lest they are accused of "aggression" again.

When two sharpnesses meet, the greater of the two will usually prevail while the lesser gives way

to either a blunted solidity or losing composure and becoming irrational attacking. Behaviourally this is shown through an argument wherein an aggressive person may have their belief questioned or proven wrong by someone more knowledgeable, and devolving into stubborn unacceptance or suddenly changing the subject. Physically it can be seen in sparring when someone becomes overwhelmed, they may retreat to their guard and remain stuck or begin to lash out and cause unnecessary injury. Depending on which, different training may be required, either the tempering of aggression or uplifting of self-confidence. This behaviour should not be viewed negatively, and an inability to see where it stems from means that any reaction or response would be made without the full information and will most likely cause further problems or an unsatisfactory outcome. Accusing someone of being aggressive when they were just trying to defend themselves because you could not see their reason for explaining themselves will more than likely pour fuel on the fire. In my experience, nothing angers someone more than saying "What are you angry for?" Someone who claims to be more "enlightened" and then proceeds to criticise others for their behaviour or actions shows how little they actually perceive and think. Unfortunately, these people are more common than those who actually have the ability to openly accept others without simply giving in to them, and so credibility for the lifestyle goes way down.

Aggression is more complicated. It is a state of being, a way of acting that can seem unreasonable from the outside but can be difficult to detect while under its influence. It has very similar outward appearances to natural and passive sharpness, but the reason and extent are usually very different. This can make it difficult to distinguish why people act in certain ways and can lead to reacting incorrectly to someone's behaviour. Aggressive behaviour is less reactive and more proactive, usually taking the initiative to act first and prevent any counter. The reasons for aggressive behaviour are many and varied, but almost always come back to the person attempting to obtain something. Whereas self-defence desires nothing more than the safety of the defender, and in more advanced cases the safety of the attacker as well, aggressive behaviour seeks to take something more from the victim.

Typical examples are money, pride, or feelings of power, and are usually chosen because that is what the attackers lack. Bullying, especially in children, comes about due to a perceived lack of something. At younger ages, it can be simple things like a friend or a toy, but as they grow up it becomes things like self-respect, love, or control, which are unfortunately much more difficult things to obtain. Whether someone is aware of the reason for their actions or not, it is important for a practitioner of martial arts and meditation to never judge them poorly for it. "Whenever you meet someone, ask yourself first this immediate question: 'What beliefs does this person hold about the good and bad in life?'" Because if he believes this or that about pleasure and pain and their constituents, about fame and obscurity, death and life, then I shall not find it surprising or

strange if he acts in this or that way, and I shall remember that he has no choice but act as he does." - Marcus Aurelius. It is the duty of those that can see how these people think and act to help them to overcome, rather than abuse and get angry. Otherwise, you are simply mimicking their own misunderstandings,

Inability to control aggression is nowadays seen as a limitation to be overcome. In the past warmongers were the ones to conquer and create new generations. Despite what may be a genetic disposition to violence, it is still now seen as a state of lacking control and being unenlightened, or irrational. As unbridled violence tends to cause very little net gain in the world, it can be difficult to manage as it is at its core, irrational. To deal with hateful violence and anger requires expanding the mind and viewpoints of many many people, all of which will have unique reasons for their behaviour that cannot be broadly covered. This is why a subversive martial art teaching the budo is incredibly helpful, as the idea of strength and power attracts those that desire it, and by teaching such skills in ways that require more in-depth thinking, new ideas and ways of acting can be brought about, via meditations and skillful teachers passionate in their art.

"Budo as a path for growth forces us to develop courage and endurance as the path has no destination beyond survival. The concept of survival of the fittest changes with the biological processes of living and dying as well as one's position in the social order and armament. Warriors who wish to be recognized as more than a mere fighter must internalize compassion, humour, problem-solving abilities, objectivity, and leadership characteristics while nurturing and improving the physical skills that attracted their interest in budo from the beginning. Often the aggressive and less caring of individuals may be attracted to what they believe to be a source of power and strength, leading to certain martial arts that cater to those that are not interested in spiritual growth and become misguided, developing strength and power but no reason to prevent them from abusing it." - Glenn Morris Soke

Too often in life people fall to one side of the scale or the other. Some people you come across in day to day life will be quiet and reserved, and allow you to get away with almost anything without them rising to meet or question you. Others will be at the forefront of all they do, blazing forward without a second thought, talking back, and frankly being quite unhelpful. Very rarely will you come across someone who has realised that it is possible to have the best of both worlds. The ability to be calm and decisive, to react appropriately and with all due consideration, to be understanding and willing to change, but to be perceived as a pushover and a weakling seen only as reactionary, is not mutually exclusive with the ability to be determined, upfront, self-confident and proactive.

It takes some time, but once someone has realised that there is no framework keeping them in their current state bar their own belief that they cannot change. The natural sharpness that results has a unique way of defusing situations that would have blown up from an aggressive person, as well as invigorating people and conversations that would run out of steam around a more passive individual. There is a general theme of "I'll do whatever I want" that comes from this mindset that in the context of someone who has not spent the time deepening their understanding and polishing their heart would come off as incredibly rude. Instead, it comes from a place of desiring a better outcome from yourself, as we already know to be the natural way with animals and humans alike, and also to the community and a genuine desire to better the lives of all others as well. These people recognise that while they do not need an outsiders approval to be happy, happiness tends to come to those that spread it. Martial arts is an incredibly insightful tool in discovering these ways of life. There is just something about learning to kill people to make you realise how fragile and precious everything is. The sharpness found in these individuals is much more controlled and subtle than someone who allows their anger to dictate their actions. The consequences are usually much less severe, if any at all, as they can manipulate the scenario to one that benefits all involved as much as possible. Compassion and sternness can go hand in hand.

Aggressive and less scrupulous individuals may be attracted to what they believe to be a source of power and strength. Thanks to various actors and movie stars, martial arts often become a harbour for those interested in physical growth, but lacking the spiritual development side. They often get lead off the path of true growth and end up as powerful and dangerous individuals, with no limits preventing them from abusing their abilities. This enhances previous feelings of superiority and creates a dynamic based around destruction with no reason, which is a horrible long term strategy for life. When physical development and growth is combined with spiritual and emotional development, people that can be strong when necessary and kind at all times are created and open themselves to others. The natural passive sharpness these people possess is capable of dealing with both aggressive attention seekers and warming to the passive and meek. This is an ideal way of life, allowing for quick adaptation to the pace of the world and universe that may otherwise leave you behind if you are set in one way or another. If we are soft, we may decide the entire world is out to get us and lock ourselves away, physically and emotionally, to prevent harm to ourselves, but preventing ourselves from really living. Or, our misplaced self-confidence may cause us to believe we are greater than everyone we meet and that our actions will have no real consequences, allowing us to act as we see fit. Both these lifestyles cause a recursive increase in their own beliefs until some event triggers a breakthrough, either by a spark of confidence, or being shown we are not as great as we think.

The dojo is a fantastic place to find both of those things. Emotions can be tempered as well as the body, and when both work in sync we find ourselves in a much more content state of being, which is considered quite ideal.

"Every living organism is fulfilled when it follows the right path for its own nature. For a rational nature, the right path is to withhold assent to anything false or obscure in the impressions made on its mind, to direct its impulses solely to social action, to reserve its desires and aversions to what lies in our power, and to welcome all that is assigned to it by universal nature. Because it is a part of universal nature just as the nature of the leaf is part of the plants' nature: except that in the case of the leaf its nature partakes of a nature that lacks perception and reason and is liable to impediment. Whereas man's nature is part of a nature that is unimpeded, intelligent, and just - in that each creature it gives fair and appropriate allocations of duration, substance, cause, activity, and experience. But do not look to find a one-to-one correspondence in every case, but rather an overall equivalence - the totality of this to the aggregate of that." - Marcus Aurelius.

We as humans are further along our spiritual journeys than most species. We are gifted with intelligence and the ability to think and reason and extrapolate. We do not have the excuse an animal does to injure others or to cause them harm, either in defence or otherwise. Our desire should be to think and grow and act per our universal calling. That which we do above all else, to use our brains and mental energies in expanding ourselves and our understanding to higher levels to the point of freeing ourselves from limitations imposed by our own beliefs of the world, and finding a way to assist others in doing the same. In that way, everyone becomes a peer working toward the same goal of self-enlightenment which will ultimately lead to a life of ease and happiness.

- Reeve Leaford June 2019

In response to the required essay topic to take part in the Hoshinden Jutaijutsu Nidan exam