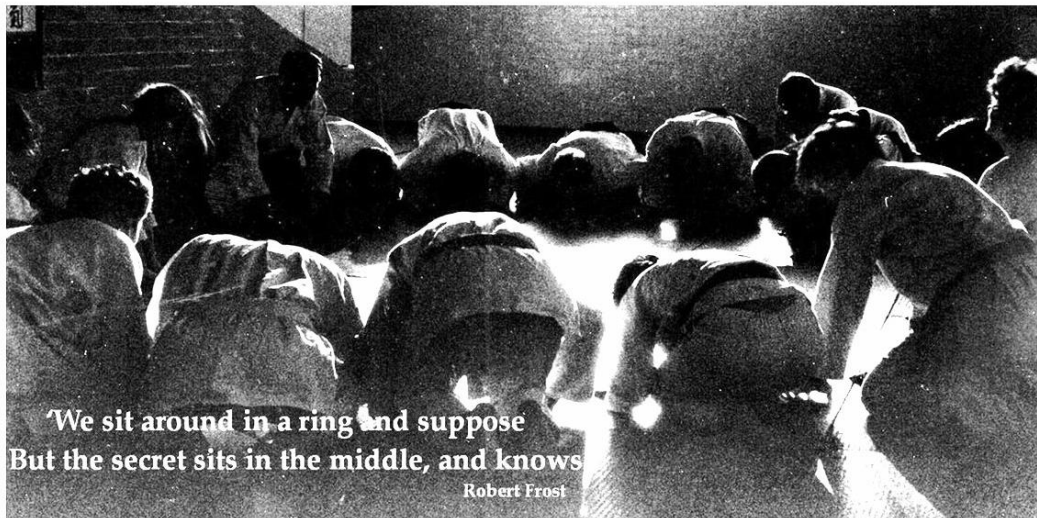


Martial arts, goldilocks, and the magpie bridge. Anything in common?

Inspired by, Robert Frost's, 'secret sits in the middle and knows.'

Written primarily with my interest in aikido in mind, however, centring, the middle, the 'one point', or 'stillness', offers you much, regardless of your art or way of life.



Starting with a few examples of centres. The centre of a wheel moves slower than the rim, yet it reaches out in all directions with control. The middle of a cup or glass is what gives it value; water flows quicker down the plughole because of the vortex – a spiral with an empty centre; the hurricane has a centre of calm while its extremities carry the devastating gift of destruction; in speech or in music, it is often a pause and silence that carries the most influence; the space between raindrops, heartbeats and breath, all have something natural and in common. There is calm and peace, when you have calm and peace you are in power, or, empowered. This is not a passive place of weakness but one of optimum potential. The founder of aikido talked of being on the 'floating bridge of heaven', as he is not around to ask, we can only speculate on his meaning, but it does sound like something central. We often dissociate our mind from body, both mind and body can have their own centres. Perhaps, mutually influenced, uniting them will likely take us to a higher level of understanding. An expanding consciousness will by nature expand the body too. Your own destiny calls for your own choices. Probably something that requires self-learning, as it may not be teachable.

Our own physical centre, hara in Japanese and a point just below the navel, chi hai or sea of energy, in Chinese, is the one point that Koichi Tohei expounded in his ki (energy) driven art. We can place our consciousness there. Extending energy is a result of placing consciousness beyond normal limits, it creates exceptional power that appears to be without effort. An easy experiment is to place consciousness in the crown of the head followed by in the feet. You should feel a huge change. Developing consciousness can allow you to maintain centre. Maintaining centre means that the point of contact with an attacker does not take your mind, therefore you are not in conflict with their touch. Again, this to our advantage.

I'd like to share two stories. It is story itself that invites and inspires our minds to join in with physical activity. In raising your spirit, you can excel beyond first thought, and story can persuade you it is a worthy journey of self-discovery.

The fence. Imagine a very low fence sits close in front of you. Feel what it is to stand on your side of the fence. Step over your imaginary fence, (in doing so it becomes a reality for the mind if not the eyes) ask yourself how it feels different there. Step back, recognise there was a different feeling on the other side. In your mind, remove the fence and stand exactly where it once was. You are now between two opposites; you occupy the space between them. You need to be the explorer of what it feels to you.



The magpie bridge. Used in tai chi and chi kung. You merely place the tip of your tongue on the roof of your mouth where you could make continuous 'L' sound. Energetically it partially completes an energy circuit and stimulates pressure points.

Para phrasing (or more like rewriting!) the original, it goes. Princess of heaven wants to visit earth, her father agrees on condition she does not neglect her duties, to sew the stars in the sky. She agrees, but while on earth she falls in love with a lowly herdsman. Returning to heaven, she asks her father if she can marry this man on earth. Again, he agrees, with the same condition attached. She goes to earth, marries the herdsman and of course neglects her heavenly duties. As punishment, she is then banished from earth, never to return again to the man she loves. However, on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month, all the magpies of the world, come together and form a living bridge between earth and heaven, the two lovers are reunited, being able to meet in the middle.

So, you can place the tongue technically or you can do it in the spirit of story. Once again we have the all-important middle. Feeling rather than thinking is all important – as it is in all martial arts too. Is it not?

According to Frost, the secret sits in the middle and knows. We too will know or experience the secret if we go to the middle. What and where the middle is for each of us and what we do, is up to each of us to find. Become the centre and be one with the universe. Space and peace. Stillness may be transient, but it allows you to see with a clarity that was hidden from you before.

Archery is martial, or at least can be. Is the arrow at peace while in flight? More importantly is the archer at peace when the bow is drawn and before the arrow is loosed. Here the archer is concentrated in relaxed calm and centred, anything other interferes with the perfection required. Both arrow and mind are temporarily stilled in the middle of action.

One might say that this 'centre thing' is the Goldilocks zone, the place where the porridge is perfect. It means you won't find better, no matter how you seek.

This centre doesn't have to be tiny either, what if we expand our centre to encompass all and in all directions. It is still the centre, isn't it?

O-Sensei (founder of aikido) said, 'never be the attacker'. An attack is one side of an extreme, it is not at peace and is also vulnerable. Even intent can be an attack, hence a state of non-judgement (a fearless, comfortable place) can hide your power from the 'enemy'.

And as you may well know, the worst enemy is often within. The path is onward.

I'll leave it with you, for those who find it interesting enough. Richard.

PS If you found it hard to read, you should have tried writing it !