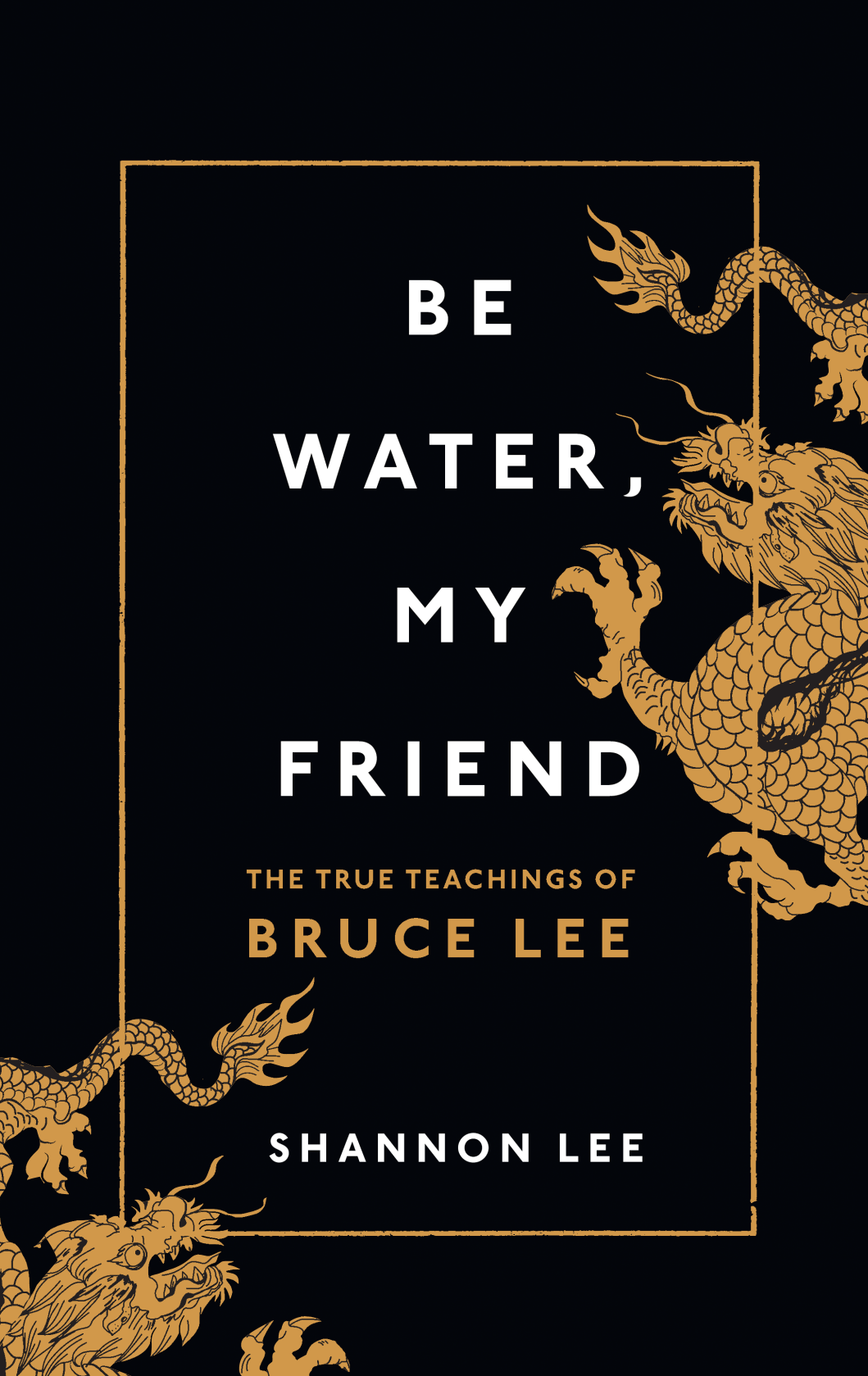
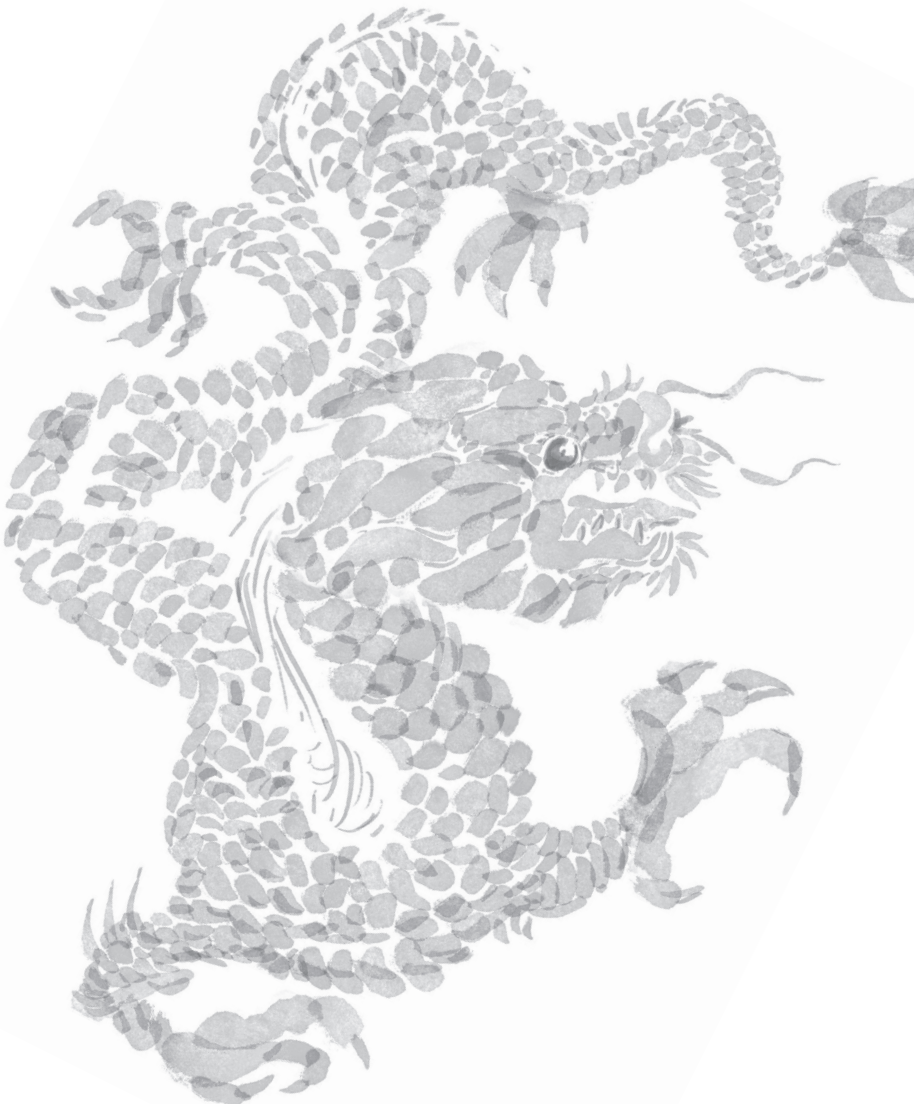

BE
WATER,
MY
FRIEND
THE TRUE TEACHINGS OF
BRUCE LEE
SHANNON LEE

BE WATER, MY FRIEND

Copyrighted Material



Copyrighted Material

BE WATER, MY FRIEND

THE TRUE TEACHINGS OF BRUCE LEE

SHANNON LEE



Copyrighted Material

1

Rider, an imprint of Ebury Publishing,
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road,
London SW1V 2SA

Rider is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com



Copyright © 2020 Shannon Lee

Shannon Lee has asserted her right to be identified as the author of this Work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

First published in Great Britain by Rider in 2020
Published in the United States by Flatiron Books, 120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271
www.penguin.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 9781846046667

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future
for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made
from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.



Copyrighted Material

To my father.

For my daughter.

For you.

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Contents

Introduction 3

1. The Water Way 11
2. The Empty Cup 33
3. The Eternal Student 56
4. The Opponent 81
5. The Tools 104
6. The Obstacle 132
7. The Rainstorm 150
8. The Living Void 166
9. The Way of the Intercepting Fist 188
10. My Friend 208

Epilogue 225

Acknowledgments 227

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Be Water, My Friend

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Empty your mind.

Be formless, shapeless, like water.

You put water into a cup; it becomes the cup.

You put water into a teapot; it becomes the teapot.

You put it into a bottle; it becomes the bottle.

Now water can flow, or it can crash!

Be water, my friend.

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Introduction

When I was growing up, my mom used to tell my brother and me not to tell people that Bruce Lee was our dad. She said, "Let people get to know you for who you are without that information." It was great advice, and for many years I skirted the issue in every conversation I could. Of course, my friends would always find out eventually when they'd come over and see our family pictures on the walls. However, with most elementary school–age girls, that just meant a curious shrug of the shoulders before we put on our roller skates or rode our bikes. But as I became an adult, I began to feel like I had a secret I was guarding, and the conversations became more difficult to avoid, especially after I started looking after my father's legacy full-time. If I skirted all the typical icebreaker questions such as "So what do you do?" and "And how did you get into that?" I started to feel not only like I was hiding, but actually lying through misdirection, and it didn't feel good. After all, I'm not ashamed to be Bruce Lee's daughter—I'm honored.

I would say, though, that being Bruce Lee's daughter and having people react to that piece of information in such overwhelming ways has made it a challenge to my own identity at times. Perhaps that's why I feel like my father's core philosophy of self-actualization (yes, Bruce Lee was a philosopher!) resonates so deeply with me. How does one honor the plain fact of their DNA while at the same time

Copyrighted Material

understanding that it doesn't mean anything about one's own soul? Or does it? Throw in my decision to spend a good portion of my life protecting and promoting the legacy of one of the humans who gifted me this life and who has meant so much to me, and questions of identity start to get pretty muddy.

"What do you remember about your father?"

It's the question I'm most frequently asked and one that used to deeply disturb me because I couldn't answer it with clarity. My father died when I was just four years old, so I don't have many of my own stories or dazzling pieces of wisdom he passed on to me directly the way his contemporaries do. I don't have a letter he had written to me specifically. And how could I explain that, despite this, I feel I know him so essentially? How could I articulate that I feel I understand him in a way that others who "knew" him might not even understand him?

I have come to recognize that these feelings—of what his essential nature is—are my memories of him. I know him in a way that's unclouded by any conflicts or hurts, jealousies or competition, or even any overly romanticized notions. I know his love, his energy signature. I know it because in our formative years, that is how we know our parents—through what we take in through our senses. Most children don't have fully formed, cognitively mature memory in play until much later than the age of four. We have to learn over time how to interpret and interact with what we are taking in per our cultural constructs. And that's why we so often get things wrong as children; we assign meaning incorrectly because we can't understand the subtleties of the whole of what is going on. We haven't had the life experience yet. But we do feel the essential quality of everything, in some ways more keenly than our adult counterparts. My father shined his loving light on me, and I remember that clearly. I remember his essential nature. I remember him.

My father was a truly phenomenal specimen of a human being in many ways—intelligent, creative, learned, skilled, driven. He worked

Copyrighted Material

really hard to cultivate every aspect of himself. At one point he said, "Some may not believe it, but I spent hours perfecting whatever I did." He worked not only at sculpting his body but at shaping his mind, educating himself, evolving his practices, developing his potential. He also worked at the little things, like having beautiful handwriting, writing and speaking grammatically well, developing a colloquial understanding of English through joke-telling, learning how to direct a film—the list goes on and on. And as a result, he created a legacy that continues to be relevant forty-seven years after his death.

But if there's one thing I've learned through the practice and understanding of his philosophy, it's that you don't need to be Bruce Lee in order to make the most out of your life. Trust me. As his daughter, the self-imposed stress to be one-tenth the specimen of a human that he was and in the *way* that he was has been overwhelming, paralyzing, and terrifying. It has stopped me in my tracks several times in my life.

But that's when I take a deep breath and remember: Bruce Lee doesn't want me to be Bruce Lee. Thank god. And what you'll discover in this book is that what Bruce Lee wants is for you to be the best version of *you* that you can be. And that will look entirely different from Bruce Lee because, well, you are you. And guess what. Bruce Lee himself was not good at a *lot* of things. He could barely change a light bulb or cook an egg. I'd like to see him try to put together some IKEA furniture. (In my imagination, it ends up smashed to splinters, with the Allen wrench sticking unceremoniously out of the drywall where it has been hurled in abject frustration.) But that aside, his words should encourage you to consider a process of self-actualization whereby you take a look at who you may actually and essentially be—where you notice what your potential is pulling you toward and how to work to cultivate *that*. What will emerge will be just as unique, just as bright, just as uplifting, and just as energized as my father was, but in your own way and in your own process. And not only that, but you will end

Copyrighted Material

up with a centered sense of purpose that will bring you much more peace of mind and joy.

That's why I got into this, after all. It wasn't the cool T-shirts (although the T-shirts are cool). It was because, as you will come to learn, I have been deeply moved and healed by these practices and words myself. I wouldn't have dedicated such a huge portion of my life to promoting my father's legacy if I didn't earnestly feel it was worthy of my time and promotion. I want you to get to know this deeply philosophical and inspirational side of my father as I know and experience him. I want you to get any little tidbit or morsel you can that contributes something of value and goodness to your life. And I hope you connect with my family's stories that are within these pages and find something of yourself in them.

So what qualifies me to be your guide? I should tell you up front that I'm not a researcher or an educator or a therapist or even a life coach. I have no expertise in anything other than Bruce Lee. And even that is a particular kind of expertise not based on a vast knowledge of dates and times and events. My expertise is in having known and been loved by him, in having gratitude for the gift of him, in living his words as best I can, and in trying diligently to find my own self.

And even without all the degrees and expertise, I've still written this book as part prescription, part allegory, part revelation. For those of you far along on your spiritual journey, this book may seem simplistic at times. It's meant to be. I'm hoping to provide access to these ideas to the biggest swath of people possible. But the further you get in the book, the deeper the messages will get. I hope you will stay with me to discover where the waterways flow.

In this book, I'll do my best to impart to you what my father's "Be Water" philosophy is and how I understand it from having been immersed in his life and legacy for many years now. For those of you who are unfamiliar with this quote of my father's, it first came into his

Copyrighted Material

understanding around the practice of martial arts, which we will use as a metaphor throughout this book for living one's most engaged life. But most important for me, the idea of being like water is to attempt to embody the qualities of fluidity and naturalness in one's life. Water can adjust its shape to any container, it can be soft or strong, it is simply and naturally always itself, and it finds a way to keep moving and flowing. Now imagine if you could learn to be that flexible, that sentient, that natural, and that unstoppable? For a martial artist like my father, this would be the height of technique. For me, it is the height of my ability as a human to be self-expressed, powerful, and free.

I truly believe, and I'm not the only one, that my father was actually one of the more notable and profound philosophers of the twentieth century. It's just that not many people know him in that way because he was an action film star and a martial artist—and thereby somehow easier to dismiss as an intellectual. When we think of a philosopher, we typically think of someone who is scholarly, published, or who may give inspirational and educational talks. We don't think of an action movie star. But my father was much more than that, as you will come to find out, through the way he lived his life and the words he left behind.

It might surprise you to find out that I'm not that precious about the material. I'm not a Bruce Lee purest about anything other than his *energy*. I do not practice an academic exactitude with his words. Where I have found it useful to illustrate what I want to say, I have combined quotes and edited quotes to make them more digestible. I use different types of language (slang, colloquialism, cultural reference) to get my point across in as utilitarian a way as possible. And I will tend to default most often to masculine gender pronouns because my father's words typically express that way, but please know that this book is meant for you—whoever you are, however you identify.

For the most part, I'll still just be skipping stones along the surface

Copyrighted Material

of the depth that exists within these thoughts and ideas. This book covers many concepts that whole books have been written about and whole practices developed around, and thus it's not a fully instructive deep dive into any one area. Rather, it's best to view this as an introduction to the prospect of a life of rich exploration and profound possibility. And, as your guide, you should know I'm still learning and growing too. But, as my father said, "The good life is a process, not a state of being. It is a direction, not a destination."

Before you dive in, I want to alert you to the naturally circuitous nature of this material. At one point I'm going to suggest to you that you need to apply your willpower, and several pages later I'm going to suggest that you yield your will. It is possible that you'll get frustrated by the seeming contradictions. But they aren't really contradictions. They are just different responses for ever-changing circumstances. Keep in mind that my father's philosophy, and more specifically the "Be Water" principle, is really an ecosystem that encompasses the entirety of existence. Try to hold on to the idea of the nature of water (its pliability, its aliveness) when that happens, and I'll do my best to be clear.

Most important, we're not aiming to adopt a rigid stance or program toward anything. This is a book about water, after all. And life is not rigid or programmed either. Just ask the sudden flat tire or the unexpected bonus. We need to make space and allow for all of life's twists and turns, ups and downs, while learning to be flexible, sentient, natural, and unstoppable in the midst of it all. Learning to maximize your potential and flow in your total being is not going to happen overnight, and the first time you get a taste of success and think that you've got it all figured out, you'll stumble in the face of some new challenge, all your old conditioning will raise its ugly head, and frustration will make you want to pound your fists against the wall. And in this moment you will get to make the choice, once again, to either shut down or grow.

Copyrighted Material

In those instances, try to remember these words of my father: "People have to grow through skillful frustrations, otherwise they have no incentive to develop their own means and ways of coping with the world." And it's true. If you never attempt anything hard or challenging, the first time something hard or challenging happens to you, you will be knocked on your ass and not know what to do. Or you might want to curl up in a ball and cower on the floor. So try to look upon frustration as your teacher or, dare I say, your friend. Try to listen to what it has to say to you and about you, about your capacity, about your beliefs, about where you need to stretch a bit, about what you really want and love, and let it guide you to a full understanding of yourself. I promise you that over time your life will open up and you will start to feel more powerful and more free.

As we go on this water journey together, we'll also talk about energized focus and joy. We'll talk about how to handle defeat and changing circumstances. We'll talk about how to cultivate faith in oneself and faith in this process, how to be actively aware within your life, and how to be centered and achieve peace of mind.

It's exciting work, but it is work. There are going to be mistakes. There are going to be blocks. But we are playing the long game. We are in this practice for a lifetime. Life, after all, is meant to be fully lived. We want to approach it with a sense of full involvement and engagement. We want to look for the things that speak to us and foster our optimism as we practice this over the full term of a life. We can submit that it will require effort, that there will be failures, but hopefully we can accept that from these we can learn and grow and become ever better still. We will learn to adopt a proper stance toward our practice of becoming our best self that is both relaxed and ready. And, most important, let's remember that we are not trying to be Bruce Lee. We are trying to be wholly ourselves.

And, by the way, you've already begun. We've been practicing at

Copyrighted Material

this in fits and starts all our lives. We may not have been fully aware of it, but we've all been trying to make the best of our lives. Of course we have! The thing this book offers is just another point of view on how one might do that. By being intrigued enough to pick up this book and see how it might speak to you, you already know you are interested in taking another step down the path of considering something more for yourself. So let's attempt to flow with the stream, and let's make it fun. Let's make it a grand experiment.

After all, this is really supposed to be about finding what you love, what energizes you, what your dreams are, and who your most essential self really is. So get ready, and, in the words of my father, attempt to hold this perspective as we make our way forward:

> Do not be tense, but ready; not thinking, but not dreaming; not being set, but flexible. It is being wholly and quietly alive, aware, and alert; ready for whatever may come. . . .

Copyrighted Material



I

The Water Way

Water may flow swiftly or it may flow slowly,
but its purpose is inexorable, its destiny sure.

Martial arts was my father's chosen love. From the age of thirteen, when he started practicing wing chun, until the end of his life at age thirty-two, he practiced every single day with little exception. He said of his passion for martial arts, "Everything I have learned, I have learned through the practice of martial arts." He had an extraordinarily sharp and insightful mind, and I often think it was a brilliant piece of fate that a mind like his was attached to such a physical and combative practice.

As it turns out, martial arts *is* a perfect metaphor for life. There are few disciplines where the stakes are so personal and so high as in a fight. Proficiency in martial arts is the practice of keeping centered and skillfully responsive under the direst of circumstances: the threat of physical harm. When you have mastery in combat, you not

Copyrighted Material

only meet a fight with composure and skill, you become an artist of movement, expressing yourself powerfully in the immediate, unfolding present with absolute freedom and certainty. When your personal safety or very life is on the line, to remain alert, mobile, and skillful is an immense feat of self-mastery.

This philosophy of movement was how Bruce Lee lived every aspect of his life. He was always after what I like to call "the real." Real fighting. Real living. Street-tested concepts. Everyday applications. He didn't deal in points earned or light touches landed, as was the style of the day in high-level competitions. He called that kind of point-oriented, competitive fighting, with so many rules on how to score without causing injury, "dryland swimming."

That's not to say he was going around challenging everyone to a street fight, though he did fight a handful of real challenge matches in his lifetime. What he did do was train all out. While protective gear did exist in a variety of arts, he was among the first to repurpose many separate pieces to create true sparring equipment for whole-body, full-contact engagement. He made focus mitts out of baseball gloves by flattening them and filling them with padding. He repurposed baseball catcher chest plates and boxing gear as well as kendo knuckle-finger gloves. This kind of sparring equipment has evolved and is commonplace now, but back in the 1960s, its use was unheard of in Chinese kung fu (or, as my father pronounced it in his native Cantonese, "gung fu").

Through heavy physical training and combat, my father had the opportunity to translate principles between mind and body—from idea to action—on a constant basis. Most (and possibly all) of what he espoused philosophically started first as an approach to being a successful martial artist. Then, as with all universal principles, he ultimately realized that these martial arts applications were broad and deep—and inimitably applicable to the art of being human.

But let's begin at the beginning.

Copyrighted Material

A Boy, a Kung Fu Master, and a Boat

My father began studying wing chun gung fu in Hong Kong at the age of thirteen. His sifu (or teacher) was a man by the name of Yip Man (also Ip Man). Yip Man was a very skillful teacher who not only drilled physical techniques but also wove in Taoist philosophy and the principles of yin and yang into his lessons. He often illustrated his teachings through parables on nature, such as using the difference between an oak tree and bamboo to make a point (the oak tree will eventually snap under a strong wind while the bamboo survives because it can move with the wind).

My father was a dedicated student and a quick learner. He practiced outside of class whenever he could and became a star pupil. But he was also a teenager—a teenager whose childhood nickname had been Mou Si Ting, which translates to "Never Sits Still"—and whose later nickname and stage name was Siu Loong, or "Little Dragon." Born in the hour of the dragon and the year of the dragon, young Bruce Lee was all fire, all "yang." And Yip Man was forever trying to teach this fiery teen the importance of gentleness, fluidity, and pliability, not just strength and cunning.

To my father's credit, he would listen and try, but his eagerness (and his temper) would get the better of him; and besides, he'd wonder, isn't it better to win however you can? What does gentleness have to do with winning really?

One day, Yip Man was trying to teach young Bruce to relax and calm his mind, to forget about himself and follow his opponent's movements instead. Essentially, he was trying to get him to practice the art of detachment—to respond intuitively to an opponent rather than get caught up in only his own strategy, obsessively calculating his own punches and moves. When my father would get in his own way, visibly trapped in his own cleverness and combativeness, sweat

Copyrighted Material