

The Art of Self-Discipline

Jason Bryant

It would seem that since man has been aware of his existence there has been a desire on his part to be in control. At first it would be over others, but later, once enlightened, the target of the control would be ones self. In the following, the issue of self-discipline will be addressed from two views; a modern perspective by Michel Foucault, and a two thousand year old view as seen by Sun-Tzu. Both of these, no matter when written, address an issue as old as man himself, the issue of self-control.

The training involved in the indisciplining of a soldier in preparation for defense in time of war is done so to produce what Foucault would call a "docile body"¹. This docile body would be a person who is capable of being whatever he is called on to be in service to some figure of authority. This of course is seen in the light of defense of a people or country. Tzu begins his section on *Strategic Assessments* by saying,

"Military action is important to the nation-it is the ground of death and life, the path of survival and destruction, so it is imperative to examine it."²

When studying these thinkers and approaching the idea of a self-discipline, one can begin to view everyday life as a battleground on which is fought the war for true

¹ Foucault, Pg. 135

² Sun-Tzu, Pg. 41

individuality. The soldier will be trained to insure that his thoughts, when faced with military decisions, those of survival, protection, etc., will most certainly be those of the figure of authority he is in service to; and an entire body of soldiers, trained and operating under this type of discipline, we call an army. But what about the individual who is simply trying to be his full self? What about the person who is fighting his own personal war to be in control of his being? As Tzu said, it is imperative that the military action be examined. One needs to step away from ones self and see what it is that would be in need of correction, or, we could say, examine the battlefield, and see ones self as an opponent to be overtaken and mastered. As surely as those in authority want each soldier to be fully obedient, for, as the body becomes "more obedient it becomes more useful,"³ the individual comes to realize that his life is most fully developed when he is in complete, rational control over his actions.

"Discipline increases the forces of the body."⁴ The more one is in control of the tools at his disposal, be it many hundreds of men acting as one, or one person simply in full control of his self, discipline increases efficiency. One must be sure of ones actions and thoughts. Just as the army has no time to think in most situations, it must simply *do*, the less time the individual has to spend thinking and debating within him self the more time there is for action, whatever it might be. One must be

³ Foucault, Pg. 138

⁴ Foucault, Pg. 138

in control and not at war inside the mind. Wang Xi, when commenting on Master

Sun says:

“Harmony among people is the basis of the Way of military operations;...When leadership is able, then there will be good discipline.”⁵

And from Zhang Yu:

“Discipline means that regulations are strict and clear.”⁶

Both of these would seem to point to the idea that the one who has discipline, the one who has control over the self, is already at an advantage for doing battle with irrational impulses. One must be in harmony with ones self if the fullness of being is to be apprehended. Being aware of the self and its placement in the world give one the advantage of control from within, being ones sole authority. Foucault, in the section *the art of distributions* states that “discipline proceeds from the distribution of individuals in space. Discipline sometimes requires *enclosure*.”⁷ This does not always have to mean enclosure within a physical structure such as a building. For our purposes we will see it as a person’s drawing within ones self for the purpose of gathering self knowledge with the intent of emerging as ones sole authority, having come to know the machine from within. Zhang Yu, when discussing strategy as seen by Master Sun, writes:

⁵ Sun-Tzu, Pg. 43

⁶ Tzu, Pg. 42

⁷ Foucault, Pg. 141

“When your strategy is deep and far-reaching, then what you gain by your calculations is much, so you can win before you even fight...Therefore it is said that victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek to win.”⁸

It would seem then that, to win in life is to first examine your living, and then to begin living fully in each moment and carry living this into each moment of life. Zhang Yu’s comment could be paraphrased as; a person should live first and then go into life as opposed to going into life trying to discover living. Foucault, in the section *the means of correct training*, states, “Discipline makes individuals.”⁹ He proceeds through the section by talking about observatories, places where people can be watched, studied, many times without their knowing it. And while this kind of surveillance of a people without their knowledge of it being done is most certainly an invasion of sorts, from our approach this is a good example of becoming aware. Through careful introspection of ones self many things can be brought into light. This taking time to observe the self in relation to the body can allow for greater control and increased awareness in the living. Observation of the individual appetites and their desire for control can be observed and countered, but they must first be acknowledged. Master Sun, when discussing the planning of a siege writes:

“Take three months to prepare your machines and three months to complete your siege engineering.”¹⁰

⁸ Tzu, Pg. 56

⁹ Foucault, Pg. 170

¹⁰ Tzu, Pg. 71

Du Mu furthers this with his comment:

“He means that it is necessary to take time to really prepare...those who cannot deploy their machines effectively are in trouble”¹¹

It would seem then that the one who is most aware of ones self, most in tune with ones being is the one who will be able to deploy into life better his machine of living. It can also be gleaned from this reading that one has only higher levels of discipline to attain; a further hold to grasp on one’s self. Foucault describes the distribution of ranks and classes among soldiers and especially within grade schools wherein pupils were moved forward, retained, or even demoted, all according to their performance within the learning environment. Levels would be seen as markings on the uniform or even the uniform itself as those who were seen to be having the hardest time adapting to the system would have it removed and replaced by sackcloth.¹² From this it can be gleaned that we can always move forward, starting where we are and looking to gain more control over the machine of being that is ours. Rewarding ourselves when there is growth and acknowledging without hesitation when we have digressed, Foucault understands this as a process of “normalizing”¹³, a process wherein others are brought up to another’s (usually society’s) standard of what is considered normal. Once we have set a goal of complete control of our selves, control in all situations no matter what, and see this as normal, we can go about normalizing our selves. All of

¹¹ Tzu, Pg. 71

¹² Foucault, Pg.181-2

¹³ Foucault, Pg. 183

our emotions could be seen as pupils, and since the learning process is disrupted when pupils are acting out on their own, we could very well see ourselves as the head master of an institution of learning seeking conformity of the pupils to the will of the one.

Foucault writes:

“... it exercised over them a constant pressure to conform to the same model, so that they might all be subjected to ‘subordination, docility, attention in studies and exercises, and to the correct practice of duties and all the parts of discipline’. So that they might all be like one another”.¹⁴

Master Sun, when writing on formation states:

“In ancient times skillful warriors first made themselves invincible, and then watched for vulnerability in their opponents”.¹⁵

From these two great thinkers we can see for our purposes that any part of us that is not in line with our desire for control is keeping us from our goal of self-control. It should therefore be seen as an enemy and we should begin to search for its weakness (or ours that allows it to be our enemy, as the case may be) and begin to defend our self from it. Master Sun, in his writings on force, tells us:

“In battle, confrontation is done directly, victory is gained by surprise.”¹⁶

With this same thinking in mind we can look and see how whenever a part of us, one of our appetites, seeks control for itself we realize it after it has happened. There was never a forewarning from within that it was coming. Conversely, we must come to

¹⁴ Foucault, Pg. 182

¹⁵ Tzu, Pg. 84

¹⁶ Tzu, Pg. 94

know ourselves so well that we can surprise our appetites by their finding themselves to be ultimately under our control. For when we are in control of all parts of our self we can then approach life as an unstoppable force. We can build up our momentum as all parts are acting as one, not fighting against one another. Master Sun writes:

“Getting people (in our case, the individual parts of the one) to fight by letting the force of momentum work is like rolling logs and rocks. Logs and rocks are still when in a secure place, but roll on an incline; they remain stationary if square, they roll if round. Therefore, when people are skillfully led into battle, the momentum is like that of round rocks rolling down a high mountain—this is force.”¹⁷

Du Mu further enlightens this writing with his comment:

“Roll rocks down a ten-thousand-foot mountain, and they cannot be stopped—this is because of the mountain, not the rocks. Get people to fight with courage to win every time, and the strong and the weak unite—this is because of the momentum, not the individuals.”¹⁸

A body with its parts united can become a powerful force, as there is unity, direction, and control through discipline.

Another advantage to this self-awareness through self-discipline is that one comes to realize the similarities between him and others. Others may be friends, enemies, or just another person encountered in the living. The ability to see this will enable one to know the others by observing them from without using the knowledge gained from one's own study of the self. With this advantage one is more apt to

¹⁷ Tzu, Pg. 99

¹⁸ Tzu, Pg. 99

quickly assess situations, more efficiently react, and thereby not find oneself on that inner battleground struggling for the correct decision. Master Sun writes:

“So it is said that if you know others and know yourself, you will not be imperiled in a hundred battles; if you do not know others but know yourself, you will win one and lose one; if you do not know others and do not know yourself, you will be imperiled in every single battle”¹⁹

When engaged in the battle that is life, it is best approached from a calm, balanced, and fore studied standpoint. It should be known that all parts of an individual can still desire control in all situations, however, the practice of discipline will prepare one for all such situations. Master Sun, in dealing with the prospect of armed struggle writes:

“Using order to deal with the disorderly, using calm to deal with the clamorous, is mastering the heart”²⁰

Calmness and stability can be achieved which allows for the mind to become peaceful. One can then address the attack and not become disturbed by all that surrounds one.

In closing, we will address the issue of justice, how it may be applied within that it might exist without. Justice has long been defined as an equal and fair treatment of all individuals no matter their place in life. All should be treated equally that it might not be said one is treated lightly or cruelly, but that all are treated justly. All the parts of the individual must not only be under equal authority but also equal acknowledgement. They must be recognized as a part and not dismissed for fear of denial building into resentment. Each part, as said earlier, must be seen as a student

¹⁹ Tzu, Pg. 82

²⁰ Tzu, Pg. 121

being disciplined for service to the one. This is how one will ultimately exist with justice within ones self. All parts of the self must be acknowledged and all kept in check, watched over from all view points to keep them from making the surprise attack. Foucault, when writing on Panopticism, talks of a prison system wherein all parts can be observed, regulated, and recorded, all for the purpose of maintaining the order of those incarcerated. Once the appetites, the desires of the individual, can be seen as imprisoned within the panoptic view of the mind and its focus on being the sole authority of this machine, all can be known about the self. It is not right for one part of the individual to be in charge over all the others, it is not a just situation. It may be said that for justice to exist one must first begin to live justly.

If one begins to see these things in light of living in the face of death, it becomes all the more imperative to have control over the parts. This being done so that the whole might fully live without being tossed to and fro from one desire to another. Master Sun addresses the varying grounds that battle is done on. One of these is called dying ground. Dying ground is where all people must eventually find themselves. Master Sun writes:

"When you will survive if you fight quickly and perish if you do not, this is called dying ground."²¹

When found on dying ground, one must assess who is in control. Is it the whole over the self with true living occurring in each moment of life, or is one part of the

²¹ Tzu, Pg. 150

whole leading all of the others into where it wants to go? Mei Yaochen elaborates on Master Sun by saying:

“When you cannot press forward, cannot retreat backward, and cannot run to the sides, you have no choice but to fight right away.”²²

There is no “then” and there is no “later” assured of, there is only the now. The battleground of life is before us and we stand on dying ground. Each moment is there for us to do battle with our passions that they might be brought under our control. Through this practicing of self-discipline, the fullness of life can be grasped in each dying moment. The one in charge of the battle is to be the self. Its army of passions all working together and in harmony allow for an existence wherein dying ground holds no concern for the self. It has been acknowledged, accepted, and the self is facing it with the challenge of living.

Jason L. Bryant is a double major in Religion and Philosophy at Ferrum College.

²² Tzu, Pg. 150

Works Cited

Foucault, Michel. (1977). *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. (A. Sheridan, trans.) New York: Random House.

Excellent book on the development of systems of punishment and how it evolved into modern rehabilitative practices. The section on Discipline is most helpful for the direction of my paper.

Tzu, Sun. (6th cent. B.C.) *The Art of War*. (T. Cleary, trans. (1988)). Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc.

A book that has developed from guidelines for actual confrontation and battle to one that is useful to anyone trying master anything including the self. This edition contains an extensive amount of commentaries from many ancient masters on all of Master Sun's approaches to the art.