The Martial Arts and Buddhist Philosophy

GRAHAM PRIEST

1. East Asian Martial Arts

My topic concerns the martial arts – or at least the East Asian martial arts, such as karatedo, taekwondo, kendo, wushu. To what extent what I have to say applies to other martial arts, such as boxing, silat, capoeira, I leave as an open question. I will illustrate much of what I have to say with reference to karatedo, since that is the art with which I am most familiar;[1] but I am sure that matters are much the same with other East Asian martial arts.

Karatedo is a style of martial art that developed in Okinawa. It evolved from a fusion of a local martial art (te) with empty hands and farm implements as weapons, and wushu techniques imported from the Chinese mainland. (A number of historically significant karate masters either came from China, or trained there.) It migrated to the Japanese mainland at the start of the 20th century, and thence, because of increasing Western involvement with Japan post Second World War, to the West.[2]

Karetedo, and the East Asian martial arts in general, teach many things. But one thing they undeniably are is a training how to be violent to others. Karate jutsu (techniques) are designed to stop an attacker in various ways, varying from restraint and temporary disablement, to maiming, and even killing. The training in the dojo (training-place) is both physical and mental. The physical training

[1] A brief autobiographical note: I have been practicing karatedo now for well over 20 years. I am 4th dan in Shitoryu (Yoshukan) and a 3rd dan in Karatedo Shobukai. I am also an Australian national kumite referee and kata judge. I have trained for substantial periods of time at dojo in Australia, Japan, the US, and the UK (the dojo in the last two countries being with styles other than my own).

[2] Karate has traditionally been passed on by direct transmission of practice. There are hardly any written records before the 20th century. Good (objective and reliable) histories of karate are therefore hard to find. One of the most authoritative I know is M. Bishop, *Okinawan Karate*, revised edition (Boston, MA: Tuttle Publishing, 1999).

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concerns learning the techniques and how to apply them (though obviously a number of them have to be practiced in a restrained way with training partners). The mental training is in the psychological discipline necessary to apply the techniques effectively, should this ever be required. It is worth noting that many East Asian martial arts, karate included, have evolved sports forms in the last 100 years. These involve competition governed by strict rules. Thus, in sporting fights, only a limited number of techniques are permissible: those which can maim or kill an opponent are not allowed. Unlike real fighting, people must play by rules; and the point becomes just to win a medal. Many clubs now concentrate on this kind of practice; in the process, essential parts of 'traditional karate' are often lost. Though I do not want to denigrate sports karate (it's alright in its place), it is clearly a deviation from the tradition of the art; and it is the 'traditional art' of which I shall be speaking.[3]

2. Two Puzzles

This is sufficient background for me to explain two puzzles which frame the rest of this essay.

Puzzle Number 1

> There is undeniably a close connection between the East Asian martial arts and Buddhism – especially Zen Buddhism. Legend has it that the first patriarch of Zen Buddhism was Bodhidharma, an Indian missionary who took up residence at the Shaolin Temple. Legend has it that the same Bodhidharma was the founder of the Shaolin wushu. Whatever the history, the Shaolin Temple is famous for producing Zen Buddhist monks who are also wushu practitioners. The connection goes far beyond this, though. Many samurai, such as the legendary Musashi Miamoto (who also practiced Zen calligraphy), were Buddhists, and saw their Buddhism and their martial practice as deeply connected.[4]

[3] Some styles of karate allow full-contact competition, which is obviously more realistic than 'non-contact' forms. But even in these, certain techniques are forbidden as too dangerous. Sporting competition was never a part of traditional karate.

[4] See W. King, *Zen and the Way of the Sword* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993). On Musashi specifically, see the last chapter of his

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The Zen Buddhist Monk Takuan Sōhō is well known for having written letters to martial practitioners giving them Zen advice.[5] Indeed, in traditional dojo, training sessions begin and end with short zazen (kneeling meditation) sessions. The Buddhist connection is also evident in popular martial arts books,[6] and Buddhist ideas are evident in the thought of many great karate masters.[7]

Now, this connection is certainly puzzling.[8] Buddhism is a religion and philosophy that is strongly anti-violence. Indeed, it has a number of Precepts (codes of conduct), the first of which expresses the principle of ahiṃsā, non-violence.[9] The major rationale of Buddhism is the elimination of duḥkha – a Sanskrit word whose meaning is hard to translate, though it certainly includes physical suffering. Clearly, the cause of a good deal of physical suffering is violence. How can those on a Buddhist path train to inflict violence on others, or give advice to others about effective ways of doing so?[10]

Puzzle Number 2

People trained in these martial arts are frequently more peaceable than ordinary people. Indeed, it is not uncommon for people who take up such an art in order to learn how to fight to lose

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Book of Five Rings, 'The Book of Emptiness'. (T. Cleary (tr.), *The Book of Five Rings* (Boston: Shambhala, 1993).)

[5] See T. Cleary (tr.), *Soul of the Samurai* (North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publications, 2005).

[6] Such as such as J. Hyams, *Zen in the Martial Arts* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1982).

[7] See, e.g, G. Funakoshi, *The Twenty Guiding Principles of Karate* (Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd., 2003).

[8] Historically, there are many political connections between Buddhist institutions and state power, including military power. (For a survey, see P. Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 264–70. The dynamics of power-structures makes *this* anything but puzzling.

[9] See, e.g., P. Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 69.

[10] It is clear why martial practitioners might want to *receive* advice concerning certain Buddhist mental practices. These can have effects that improve fighting, as we will note in due course. However, that hardly explains why a Buddhist should want to *give* such advice.

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the desire to do so. It is hard to get documentary evidence of this;[11] but it is folklore, and certainly gels with my experience. And legend has it of many great karate masters that they refused to fight, even when they knew they would win easily.[12] Again, this is odd. Training to climb mountains makes you *more* likely to climb mountains. Training to speak a foreign language makes you *more* likely to speak the language. How is it that training in how to be violent makes you *less* likely to be violent?

A caveat here. Not all training in an East Asian martial arts produces peaceful people. Some martial arts clubs are quite prepared, for example, to turn out bouncers who are only too happy to apply their martial skills on unsuspecting victims. A more guarded way of putting my point is, therefore, that there is something about certain kinds of martial training that can have this effect on people. What and why?

Doubtless, answers to both of these questions are complex and multifaceted. Thus, one reason, one might suppose, that Buddhists train in a martial art is for self-defence. Buddhism *per se* is not against this. And one reason that a training in violence might make you less violent is that violence and aggression are often driven by gut-reaction fear. If you know that you have the ability to defend yourself, fear may well be reduced, or at least controlled.

But these can hardly constitute sufficient answers. To learn to defend yourself, it is hardly necessary to practice hours a week, year after year – long beyond the point where any casual attacker is a serious threat. A short self-defence course with a readily available weapon such as a stick (or, in modern terms, a can of mace), is probably just as good at this. And though decreasing one's fear may make

[11] Some can be found in C. Layton, 'The Personality of Black-Belt and Non-Black-Belt Traditional Karateka', *Perceptual and Motor Skills* **67** (1988): 218; C. Layton, 'Anxiety in Black-Belt and Non-Black-Belt Traditional Karateka', *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, **71** (1990): 905–6; T. Nosanchuck, 'The Way of the Warrior: the Effects of Traditional Martial Arts Training on Aggressiveness', *Human Relations* **34** (1981): 435–44; T. Nosanchuck and L. M. C. MacNeil, 'Examination of the Effects of Traditional and Modern Martial Arts Training on Aggressiveness', *Aggressive Behavior* **15** (1989): 153–9; A. Rothpearl, 'Personality Traits in Martial Artists: a Descriptive Approach', *Perceptual and Motor Skills* **50** (1980): 391–401.

[12] See, e.g., the anecdote in J. Hyams, *Zen in the Martial Arts* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1982), 131–3.

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one less aggressive, this hardly explains why trained martial artists should not be violent just for the love of it (in the way that people play the piano just for the love of it). There must be more going on than these things.

In what follows, I want to suggest a more profound explanation: that a training in the martial arts of the appropriate kind can itself be a way of treading the Buddhist path.[13] In what follows, I will explain some of the basics of this path. I will then explain how a martial training can implement at least certain important aspects of it. I will end by returning to our two puzzles.

3. Basic Buddhism

There are many forms of Buddhism, just as there are many forms of Christianity. And there are significant differences – metaphysical, ethical, and practical – between the different forms. Thus the metaphysics of emptiness (śūnyatā), to be found in all the Mahāyāna Buddhisms, is quite different from the reductionism of the earlier Abhidharma traditions. The central importance of the virtue of compassion, again in Mahāyāna Buddhisms, is quite different from the stress on self-enlightenment of the pre-Mahāyāna forms. And the tantric practices of Tibetan Buddhisms are a million miles away from the kōan practice of Rinzai Zen Buddhism.[14]

There are, however, some general ideas common to all forms of Buddhism. These are based on the direct pronouncements of the historical Buddha (Siddhārtha Gautama, c. 6th century BCE) and his first teachings, known as the Four Noble Truths. These generic considerations will be sufficient for our purposes.[15] I emphasize that I am not here concerned to defend the views – though I do assume (and I think, justifiably) that Buddhist practices have a certain causal efficacy. My aim is simply to explain the ideas, so that I can make the relevant points about martial arts practices.

The Buddha's teachings present a picture of what one might call the human condition, and how to ameliorate it. All people get ill,

[13] For a light-hearted expression of the idea, see G. Priest, 'An Interview with Bodhidharma', ch. 2 of G. Priest and D. Young (eds), *Martial Arts and Philosophy* (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2010).

[14] On the variety of Buddhisms, see D. Mitchell, *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[15] On the following, see, e.g., M. Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2007), chs. 2, 3.

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age (if they are lucky enough), may lose limbs, loved ones; many suffer at the hands of tsunamis, nuclear disasters, and other 'acts of god'; they are maimed or traumatized by war. And so the catalogue of unhappinesses goes on. Of course, people do derive pleasure from many things in life; but the natural consequence of this is that they are not content with such impermanent pleasures, and desire more – generating more unhappiness. As Hume observed, then, if the world is designed by a god, human happiness was not his purpose.[16]

There is, according to Buddhism, something that can be done about this situation, however. The first thing is to realise that, though we cannot really control what fate brings our way, we can control our *attitude* to it. When bad things happen, we get upset because we *make* ourselves so. It is the mental clinging and attachment, that we bring to events, which generate the unhappiness. Moreover, the world we live in is one of impermanence. Nothing lasts forever; all things will eventually pass. Once one realises this, the folly of clinging becomes patent.

A particularly pernicious case of attachment concerns the self. A person is like a car, whose parts come together at a certain time, interact, wear out sometimes and are replaced, and finally fall apart. Our parts are not mechanical or electronic in the same way as those of a car: they are psycho-biological; but the point remains the same. Indeed, just as, in reality, there is nothing more to the car than the sum of its parts, there is nothing more to a person than the sum of their parts. There is no essential self or soul which holds them all together.[17] We certainly have the illusion that there is, though. We all think that there is an essential 'me-ness', something which is present throughout my existence, which defines me as me. The attachment to this non-existent object is an especially strong source of grief.

4. The Noble Eightfold Path

An upshot of all this is that it makes sense to get rid of the attitude of attachment, which is the one source of unhappiness that is largely

[16] See his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Part X.

[17] Which is not to say that the *person* does not exist, any more than that the car does not exist – though some Buddhist schools, notably the early Abhidharma schools, do endorse the thought that a partite object does not have the same reality as its ultimate parts.

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under our control. If one can do this, then one will be left with a resulting peace of mind, whatever slings and arrows of outrageous fortune arrive.[18] Getting your head around the kind of world you live in and the kind of thing you are (not), certainly helps. But simply knowing the facts is not enough. One has to break ingrained and powerful psychological habits. Illusions can be hard to shake off, even when one knows that they *are* illusions.

To this end, the Buddha suggested a number of fields of attention that, when suitably pursued, can help. This is the fourth of the Noble Truths, itself called the Noble Eightfold Path.[19] The eight fields are usually broken up into three groups.

1. Cognitive: *right view*; *right intention*. Having the right view is, as I have said, a good start. But just as important is the determination to dig oneself out of the hole one is in. Without that, nothing will happen.[20]
2. Ethical: *right speech*, *right action*, *right livelihood*. Cutting this cake into three is, to a certain extent, artificial. The point is that one should treat others appropriately. Don't lie, steal, kill, or do other things that are wont to inflict suffering on others. No doubt an important part of the idea here is that if one does not like to suffer at the hands of others, one should not inflict suffering on them. But more important is the fact that the practice of putting the interests of others before one's own is an important step in ridding oneself of the self-centred grasping which destroys peace of mind.
3. Attitudinal: *right effort*, *right mindfulness*, *right concentration*. Right effort is the realisation of the right intention. Akrasia is all too easy, and self-discipline is required. Right mindfulness is the ability to be aware of what one's mind and body are doing. How are you going to be able to control your mind if you are not aware of what it is up to? The same goes for your body. Not that

[18] One can find views similar to this in various Hellentistic philosophies, such as Stoicism and Epicureanism. See, e.g., T. Irwin, *Classical Thought* (*A History of Western Philosophy: 1*) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), chs. 8, 9.

[19] See, e.g., J. M. Koller, *Asian Philosophies* (4th edn.) (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002), ch. 12, or D. Mitchell, *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), ch. 2.

[20] Note that determination is not the same as attachment. The former is a resolute decision to act in a certain way. The latter is about the attitude one has to the results of our actions when things go right or wrong.

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> these two things are unconnected. Mind and body interact. How can you expect your mind to work at its best if you abuse your body smoking heavily, over-eating, or living in inebriation? Conversely, how can you expect your body to work properly if your mind is a mess? The Latins who popularised the slogan 'mens sana in corpore sano' knew what they were doing. Finally, right concentration is the ability of mental focus. Right mindfulness is not going to be achieved if one's mind is all over the place.

Of course, how best to implement these steps is not entirely obvious. (And that is where many of the variations in Buddhist practices come in.) But all forms of Buddhism agree that some kinds of meditative practices are important. There are various kinds of such practice. This isn't the place to go into the variety;[21] suffice it here to note that mental focus – mindfulness and concentration – are central to all of them.

5. Martial Training

We are now in a position to see how a martial training can be taken to implement some of these Buddhist ideas.

Start with the Noble Eightfold Path. There is little in a martial training which addresses the cognitive aspects of this. I have never trained at a dojo where any Buddhist (or other) philosophical ideas about impermanence, the self, attachment, and so on, were discussed.[22] But this is perhaps the least important aspect of the Path. In most Māhāyana Buddhisms, the fundamental truth about reality is ineffable, a simple tathatā ('thatness');[23] any description of how things are, is ultimately inadequate. Buddhist doctrines may be helpful *en route,* but they are themselves just as inadequate in the last instance. They are just a skilful means (upāya), to be discarded when they have done their job. Indeed, in Zen, great stress is placed on the fact that enlightenment can be arrived at only by

[21] See, e.g., O. Leaman, *Key Concepts in Eastern Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1999), 200 ff.

[22] Though of course there may be *some* Buddhist practitioners who also teach a martial art, and who talk their students about Buddhist ideas. Thus, see K. Furuya, *Kodo: Ancient Ways: Lessons in the Spiritual Ways of the Warrior/Martial Artist* (Santa Clarita, CA: Ohara Publications, 1996).

[23] See, e.g., D. Keown, *Dictionary of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 296.

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direct wordless transmission.[24] Actions speak louder than words. (And there is certainly plenty of action in a dojo!)

The connections between a martial training and the other parts of the Path are more evident. Take ethics, to start with. Again, this is rarely discussed in a dojo, but a good training embeds in people crucial ethical values. One bows with respect on entering and leaving a dojo, at the beginning and the end of a kata performance, and of training with a partner. One has respect for one's teacher and the senior students from whom one learns.[25] One has concern for the well-being of one's training partners and those whom one teaches. Anger, ill will, and lack of self-control are not tolerated. And one learns respect for oneself as well. Nor is this something that stops when one leaves the dojo: one takes it out of the dojo too. In the dojo, one learns how to interact with other people, not just with other karateka. And one thing that goes with this respect is a determination not to use violence unless absolutely necessary. In karate, all kata begin with a defensive movement. This is often taken to be symbolic of the fact that karate techniques should only ever be used in self-defence. There is a traditional saying: 'karate ni sente nashi' (in karate there is no first strike).[26]

Effort and self-discipline are also required and developed in a martial training. For a start, these are required in exercises that build up strength and stamina. Training routines also have to be repeated many times until them become reflexive. One has to discipline oneself to do what one is told immediately and without reservation. And one learns the self-discipline of patience. For many things (such as the results of grading exams) one just has to wait. One aspect of self-discipline is particularly germane in the present context. In the dojo, things will often happen that you don't like:

[24] See, e.g., A. Welter, 'Mahākāśyapa's Smile: Silent Transmission and the Kung-an (Kōan) Tradition', S. Heine and D. S. Wright (eds), *The Kōan: Texts and Contexts in Zen Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 75–109.

[25] On the importance of respect in the martial arts, see D. Young, 'Bowing to Your Enemies: Courtesy, Budo and Japan', *Philosophy East and West* **59** (2009): 188–215; and, for a more light-hearted account, D. Young, 'Pleased to Beat You' ch. 1 of G. Priest and D. Young (eds), *Martial Arts and Philosophy* (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2010).

[26] See, e.g., G. Funakoshi, *The Twenty Guiding Principles of Karate* (Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd., 2003), 23 ff. On the theme of violence, Buddhism, and the martial arts, see C. Mortensen, 'Budo for Buddhists', ch. 14 of G. Priest and D. Young (eds), *Martial Arts and Philosophy* (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2010).

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you get hit in sparring, you make a mistake in a kata when everyone is watching, you fail a grading exam. You have to learn to shrug this off, put it behind you – to just carry on and focus on what comes next.

For the final two parts of the Path, one has to know something about kata. A major part of a martial training is the learning of sequences of movements, kata. These can be long or short, fast or slow, but are repeated over and over again until one does them without thinking. Developing a kata can be done only with great mindfulness of one's body, the position of one's limbs, the angle and speed of movements. Moreover, a kata should be performed with complete focus and concentration. When one performs a move of the kata, that and only that is where one's being is. In the context of Buddhist meditation practices, this would be called 'one-pointedness' (citta-ekagratā).[27] I think, in fact, that it is not fanciful to see kata performance as a kind of moving meditation. (In Buddhist traditions, meditation does not have to be done sitting or kneeling: it can be done walking, for example.[28])

6. Kumite

Another central part of a martial training is kumite. This is fighting with a training partner to develop one's skills in practice. Kumite can be of many kinds, from simple prearranged exercises, to free sparring, where both people can attack or defend in any way they like (though always with control).

For many people, this is the hardest part of the training. Being attacked by someone (often someone who is better than you), naturally brings out fear, and aggression naturally comes in its wake. One must learn to conquer these – if only because fear and aggression make one much less efficient in performing: they slow down one's reactions, and make one's techniques wild and inefficient. It's an old adage, but a true one, that one's true opponent in this situation is not one's attacker but oneself: one's own mental dispositions, which need to be controlled.

[27] See D. Keown, *Dictionary of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 62.

[28] See, e.g., T. N. Hahn, *The Long Road Turns to Joy: A Guide to Walking Meditation* (Berkeley, CA; Parallax Press, 1996). Indeed, some Zen Buddhist masters, such as Hakuin, held kneeling meditation to be somewhat useless. See T. P. Kasulis, *Zen Action Zen Person* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 1981), 111.

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What one must learn to do is to empty the mind of all thoughts, emotions, and react purely spontaneously (a spontaneity based, of course, on routines hard wired in by constant repetition). This is what is called 'mushin' (no mind) in Japanese.[29] Naturally, one thing that goes in the process is any sense of self. Getting rid of the sense of self is, as I noted, one of the most important things in Buddhism. Perhaps for evolutionary reasons, in a situation where one has to fight, one's sense of self is particularly strong. If it can be overcome in this particularly stressful situation, it ought to be much easier to overcome it in more mundane situations.

A final word on kiai. This is a shout used at various times in both kumite and kata. The point is to increase the effectiveness of one's action. It does this by focusing mind and body into a single undiluted present. Shouts may be used in the Zen tradition for exactly the same reason.[30]

7. The Puzzles Revisited

There are probably other important connections between a martial training and Buddhism that I have missed. But I hope that I have said enough, anyway, to demonstrate that an appropriate martial training can be a way of implementing a Buddhist path, even though one may not be consciously aware of this, or even if one has never even heard of Buddhism.

Let me end by returning to the two puzzles with which I started. Why has Buddhism often been connected with a martial training? That should now be obvious. It is one way of following the path. It is no accident that most martial arts are called 'do': ways. They are not simply learning to fight, but training in a path of much greater import. (Of course, I am not suggesting that a training in a martial

[29] As described by Takuan Sōhō in his letters of advice. See the translations in T. Cleary (tr.), *Soul of the Samurai* (North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publications, 2005). For a light-hearted commentary, see B. Finnegan and K. Tanaka, 'Don't Think! Just Act!', ch. 3 of G. Priest and D. Young (eds), *Martial Arts and Philosophy* (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2010). A more extensive discussion of mushin can be found in E. Herrigal, *Zen and the Art of Archery* (New York, NY: Random House, 1981). The similarity between Zen and the martial arts, in that both require unmediated response, rather that premeditated action, is noted by T. P. Kasulis, *Zen Action Zen Person* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 1981), 121.

[30] See T. P. Kasulis, *Zen Action Zen Person* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 1981), 122.

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art is the only way to follow the path, or even the best way. It seems entirely plausible that different ways are appropriate for different people.)

And why should those who undergo this kind of training become more peaceful people? If I am right, the training is effective in inculcating those attitudes important to Buddhism – in particular, in freeing oneself from attitudes that result in mental dis-ease, and allowing one to be in a state of inner peace. Greater inner peace leads naturally to greater outer peace. Those with inner peace have less desire to be aggressive or violent to others (or themselves). I am not suggesting that all this is a conscious matter. Many things we do have an effect on our mental states in ways of which we are unaware. Nor am I suggesting that accomplished martial practitioners are Buddhist saints. That would be absurd. They usually have the same human failings as anyone else. But as Aristotle observed, it is in our practices that we develop the sort of person we are.[31] This is certainly true of religious practices, such as those of Buddhism, and, it might now appear, of an appropriate martial training.[32]

Departments of Philosophy, Universities of Melbourne, St Andrews, and the Graduate Center, City University of New York
g.priest@unimelb.edu.au

[31] *Nichomachean Ethics*, Book 2, Ch. 1.

[32] A version of this paper was given under the title 'Karatedo and Buddhism', at the Royal Institute of Philosophy, London, October 2011, in their series of lectures on Philosophy and Sport. I am grateful to the audience there for their helpful comments. I am grateful, also, to two anonymous referees for their comments, and, especially, to Damon Young for his.

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