

Be Water, My Friend

The Teachings of
BRUCE LEE

Shannon Lee



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To my father.
For my daughter.
For you.

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.

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 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 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 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 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 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.

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 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....

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 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.

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 dripping off his furrowed brow, Yip Man would step in again and again and tell him to conserve his energy by going with the natural bend of things. “Never assert yourself against nature,” he told him. “Never be in frontal opposition to any problem, but control it by swinging with it.” Finally he stopped young Bruce and said, “Don't practice this week. Go home and think about what I've said.”

Don't practice this week?! That was like telling my father not to breathe for a week. Banished from class, Bruce did continue to practice on his own, and he meditated and struggled in solitary contemplation to understand what his teacher was trying to say. Frustrated, and with pent-up energy to spare, he decided one day to take a small boat out onto Hong Kong harbor with his newly found and highly resented free time.

He stopped rowing after a while and just lay in the boat, letting the waves take him. While he rocked along, he began to replay in his mind his teacher's urgings and all the time he had spent on training. What was he doing wrong? Why couldn't he understand what his teacher was saying? It didn't make any sense! His frustration spiked. In his fury, he leaned over and punched the South China Sea several times with all his might.

Suddenly a thought struck him, and he stopped and looked down at his wet hand. My father later wrote about it in this essay:

Had not this water just now illustrated to me the principle of gung fu? I struck it but it did not suffer hurt. Again, I struck it with all my might—yet it was not wounded! I then tried to grasp a handful of it but this proved impossible. This water, the softest substance in the world, which could be contained in

the smallest jar, only seemed weak. In reality, it could penetrate the hardest substances in the world. That was it! I wanted to be like the nature of water.

He had a second revelation as he watched a bird fly overhead and cast its reflection on the water in the very next moment:

Should not the thoughts and emotions I have when in front of an opponent pass like the reflection of the bird flying over the water? This is exactly what Professor Yip meant by being one in whom feeling was not sticky or blocked. Therefore in order to control myself, I must first accept myself by going with and not against my nature.

And thus began my father's long and intimate relationship with water, an element that is soft yet strong, natural yet able to be directed, detached yet powerful, and, above all, essential to life.

No Martial Arts Experience Necessary

At this point, you may be thinking, "I'm not a martial artist; how is this book going to apply to me and why do I care about the epiphany of a seventeen-year-old from more than sixty years ago?" Don't worry. While we will be talking about martial arts from time to time, it will only be by way of metaphor and for the illustration of concepts that are applicable across general human experience. Sometimes I find it easier to digest abstract ideas through a more grounded physical example. As to why we may care about being like water, my father's philosophical ideas, coupled with the way he lived his life, have inspired people the world over, including myself, to transform our lives for the better. And the way he lived his life was by way of water's example.

At its essence, water flows. It finds its way around (or even through) obstacles. My father would call this having "no limitations." Water is present to its circumstances and surroundings and therefore ready to move in any direction that allows it passage. That openness and pliability means it is in a constant state of readiness, but a natural readiness because it is simply being wholly itself. To be like water, then, is to realize your most whole, natural,

and actualized self where you are living as much as possible in the slipstream of life as you forge your own path forward.

Trust me when I say there is something in these pages for you whether you are an athlete, a stay-at-home mom, a student, a musician, an accountant, an entrepreneur, a cop, or whatever shape of human you take. Remember, though, that, at the same time, not everything in this book may be for you. You should never just take something hook, line, and sinker because someone else told you it was true. What is true for one may not be true for another—or the path to a shared truth may look very different for you than for someone else. There's no one piece of advice nor one set of tools that will fit everyone. I can't tell you what will work for you—only you will know what that is as you try some of these things on. I'll share my family's stories and my thoughts, experiences, and ideas. The rest is up to you. And if you don't find anything helpful here, don't give up. There are many resources in this world. Keep seeking, and you will find what you're looking for.

So let's metaphorically bow in, shall we? Every martial arts lesson starts with a bow. It's not a subservient thing. It's an intention thing. I'm here. I've shown up. I'm paying attention and I'm ready to participate.

Thank you for being here. Now let's start with some water basics.

No Limitation

Why is the idea of being like water such an important principle of my father's? After all, my father's core tenet that he coined to represent his art and his life was actually this:

Using no way as way, having no limitation as limitation.

But doesn't that describe the nature of water perfectly? For anyone who has ever had to contend with a leak, it is sometimes baffling how the water got in and ended up where it did. Sometimes you have to rip the whole wall or ceiling apart to find out where it's coming from and how it's traveling to its destination.

Just recently I had such an experience, with a terrible leak in my office. We were pretty sure it was coming through from the roof, but

it wasn't just dripping down from a hole directly above. It was springing up in all kinds of places and seeping through the wall on the upper floor. The landlord sent someone to fix it three times, but without any obvious point of entry, the basic attempts the repairman made were not getting to the root of the problem. So we kept our tarps and buckets in place on the upper floor, thinking that everything on the floor below was relatively safe.

Then it rained again, and torrentially this time. And because the water had been getting into the wall on the upper floor, it just continued down its path through the wall, hit the ceiling beneath, and ran along the beams. When we returned the next day, water was dripping off the ceiling beams across the expanse of the first floor—it was literally raining indoors.

Distressing as it was for us, why is this admirable on the part of the water? Well, the water was not to be deterred. It was going to find a path, or even multiple paths. It would move along until it met with an obstacle, and then, if it needed to, it would change course and keep on flowing. It used “no way” as its way. In other words, it used every possible way. And it ran along without limitation. Even though we have since patched the roof, the rainwater is still undeterred in finding its way, though now it does so outside the building instead of inside. Thankfully.

This is the basic way of water. It is unstoppable. And though the word *water* is reflected nowhere in my father's core tenet above, the phrase represents perfectly one of the preeminent water basics that I want us to begin to sit with—that water is undeterred. It will carve canyons into mountains over centuries. And when I say I want us to “sit with” this, I use this term because I don't want us to only think about it. After all, life isn't only a mental exercise. When I say “sit with,” I mean be with it—consider it, notice it, experience it, feel it, and allow it in.

Let's think of water as unstoppable, similar to how many people think of Bruce Lee as unstoppable. Whether you know anything about him or not, you likely still have a picture of a heroic, skilled badass who plowed through his opponents—whether in real life or just in the movies.

So what does it take to be unstoppable like water?

Be Aware

For my father, being “in the flow” meant, in part, being present—

choosing to live his life consciously, purposefully, intentionally. Being present means more than occupying physical space. It's not just about whether you show up for class, but whether you are actively participating in class. Are you listening, asking questions, taking notes, engaging in the conversation? Or are you physically there but on your phone, half asleep, hoodie up, earbuds in? Being present is a key component of being like water. Why?

Well, if the rainwater from my example above were not in active participation with its environment at every moment, then it would not have found its way into my office. That is the nature of water. We, however, get to choose whether to stop at the first obstacle or keep going, unlike water, which *always* chooses to keep going if given the opportunity. And, remember, even seemingly still waters are fed by deep, rumbling springs or consistent rains and snowmelt, else they go fetid or ultimately evaporate. So if we want to fulfill our human potential, then we can't let ourselves be complacent or stopped either—we have to find our way forward and keep being replenished again and again. And in order to find our way, we need to be paying attention. We need to be aware of what is happening all around us.

My father has a quote that I love, which reads, “To grow, to discover, we need involvement, which is something I experience every day, sometimes good, sometimes frustrating.” You might think, “Well, isn't everyone involved in their own lives?” The truth of the matter is that while, yes, we are involved in the sense that we are alive, as in breathing and doing things, many of us are not fully tapping into our consciousness, our self-awareness, and, ultimately, our potential. We are not proactively directing the course of our lives and paying attention to and working with our energy and the environments and relationships we find ourselves in. For many of us, life happens *to* us. We get trapped in unconscious patterns of living and forget that there are, in fact, many choices and many ways to be *fully involved* in the creation of our lives. To say it another way, we want to be fully alive versus merely subsisting. And to do that, we have to be paying attention.

That's not to say that we must always be “on,” always in control, always “in the zone.” That could be exhausting. And such a life may not be possible for most of us 24/7, because, as we know, life is not always within our control. Challenging things happen to us from out of the blue. We get fired. We get sick. We experience a sudden loss. Or we just get tired and tune out sometimes. But this notion of cultivating a Bruce Lee “water practice” is one of heightening our

awareness and acquiring and sharpening our tools so that we have the capacity to encounter life, and whatever life throws at us, with as much skill, consciousness, and grace as possible—while finding our ultimate way.

And presence and awareness play a big part in that. If my mind is polluted with all manner of negativity or I'm snapping at people out of pure emotional reaction, then I am not responding—I am reacting. If I am not aware of how I am feeling or what thoughts are going through my head, then how do I change bad habits or find more happiness and personal satisfaction? I need to be able to observe myself in order to see what I need to amend. If I am paying attention, then I can see what's happening all around and within me, and only then am I free to choose how I want to participate. You can't choose a response if you can't even see that there are choices to be made.

Imagine for a moment what it would be like if you had the capacity and the skill to choose your response to every situation in every moment rather than being overtaken by impulsive reaction. What if you didn't get carried away by your emotions or shut down and become paralyzed in the face of some challenge? Imagine what it would feel like to be fully present to every experience without losing yourself in it. What it would feel like to have the perfect response that reflected exactly who you are in every situation without taking it on and being personally affronted by it. It would feel powerful, right? And I understand that as great as that imaginary, powerful life sounds, it may also feel unrealistic right now. That's okay. We are going to talk about this realistically and humanely as we go because we are not meant to be perfect. That's right: *we are not meant to be perfect.*

To be like water is not to be aspiring to perfection. Perfection is a difficult master. To be like water is not to be controlling of everything. Control is a tight yoke. For now, let's consider perfection and control like this.

There is perfection in the constant and imperfect unfolding of life, for every imperfection creates the opportunity for me to learn something that I can then grow from and put into practice. By practicing that which challenges me—practicing acceptance, practicing patience, practicing loving, practicing improvement—I will gain confidence until the skill I am practicing becomes second nature. Perfection as we typically think about it should be treated more as a way to focus our attention rather than a final accomplishment that we attain. To come to terms with this notion is

to be able to view the imperfections of life as the perfect teaching tools and opportunities for our own growth and betterment, rather than a measure of our success.

And then there's control. In the astrology book *The Secret Language of Birthdays* by Gary Goldschneider and Joost Elffers, each day of the year has a name or title associated with it. I am born on "the Day of Solid Control." Good grief. I don't think most people I know would characterize me as the classic control freak (at least I hope not). I feel I've had enough things happen to me that were beyond my control that I am more apt to throw up my hands in surrender and make the most of a situation than to try to bend everything to my will. However, there's a balance to be struck here. And maybe it's in practicing how much control I can exercise through "not controlling." Where can I see the path opening up in the wake of a challenge? How much can I enact my will toward whatever goals I have, while at the same time making space for what is actually happening, in the midst of life's journey?

Recently I had a big project that I really believed in, and it did not go as planned. More than that, it seemed to be failing big-time. So I tried to control it by moving heaven and earth to get the right people in place and get the necessary changes to happen to keep things on track, all while we were running out of money and options fast. I loved the project. I wanted to keep it going, but the cards just weren't turning up in my favor. So I decided in the eleventh hour to stop resisting what was clearly happening. It was messy. I had investors with expectations. I had to lay people off and shut things down. But I decided to be present with what was happening and stop resisting it. I gave the future of the project to the universe, and I said, "Show me the way." And like water, I began to follow the course of this new unfolding rather than try to build a thousand dams to enforce the direction of the stream.

Yes, one phase of the project ended, but out of it came some new ideas (better ideas!) and new potential partners and possibilities. And the most important thing was that by letting go and following the natural way of things, I wasn't giving up or failing. I was finding a new way, and I reduced my stress and my anxiety while gaining more energy as well. And even though I still don't know if this project will be successful, I continue to be able to be present with it, to show up and give my energy where I need to give it and let the rest of it unfold naturally. The difference is that I'm no longer trying to control the destiny of this whole complicated venture, nor am I trying to perfect it. I'm participating and cocreating, but no longer

forcing.

My father said, “Here is natural instinct, and here is control. You are to combine the two in harmony.” And so I constantly try to ask myself how much “control” I can exercise within my perfectly imperfect self to be fully present and accountable in the face of challenging scenarios and people—such that I get to realize some new way of being for myself and all I create. Sometimes I’m not very successful, and there is bountiful learning in the reflection of what could have been done differently. But all the growth and learning, whether in the moment or later, only gets to happen if I am fully present to and aware of my internal and external experiences.

Be Pliable

When man is living, he is soft and pliable; when he is dead, he becomes rigid. Pliability is life; rigidity is death, whether we are speaking of the body, the mind, or the spirit. Be pliable.

One of the simplest and most easily grasped lessons of water is its pliability. Throw a rock in a stream, the stream adapts to make space for the rock. This is one of the lessons my father received as a teenager that day he realized that water was a metaphor for gung fu. When he tried to grasp the water, it ran through his fingers. When he tried to punch the water, it moved out of the way of his fist and did not suffer harm. My father went on to speak often about the importance of gentleness and pliability when it comes to life and martial arts.

He also frequently recounted the lesson of the bamboo and the mighty oak tree in the storm as relayed to him by his sifu. The rigidity of the oak tree ultimately leads to its demise, just as a rigid mind or attitude can keep you from learning and growing and thereby lead to stress and discontent over time. If you cannot be pliable in your thinking or your response to a situation, then you have limited your options for success, for growth, and for joy. So how can we remain pliable and responsive and centered? We already know that one main ingredient is being present and aware of what is happening so that you *can* respond flexibly. Let’s take a look at a martial analogy.

Most literally, the combative arts require one to be fully present

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www.flatironbooks.com

Cover design by Henry Sene Yee

Cover illustration based on © Nipatsara Bureepia/Shutterstock.com

The Library of Congress has cataloged the print edition as follows:

Names: Lee, Shannon, 1969– author.

Title: Be water, my friend: the teachings of Bruce Lee / Shannon Lee.

Description: First U.S. edition | New York: Flatiron Books, [2020]

Identifiers: LCCN 2020031675 | ISBN 9781250206688 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781250794833 (international, sold outside the U.S., subject to rights availability) | ISBN 9781250206695 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Martial arts—Philosophy. | Spiritual life. | Lee, Bruce, 1940–1973.

Classification: LCC GV1101 .L44 2020 | DDC 796.8—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020031675>

eISBN 9781250206695

Our ebooks may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use. Please contact the Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales Department at 1-800-221-7945, extension 5442, or by email at MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com.

First Edition: 2020