



Cultivating a Warrior's Heart

Does a true warrior need to use force? Rethinking the adage that “might makes right” with a more evolved solution to conflict

Story by Debra Bokur
Illustrations by James Rawsthorne

The word “warrior” nearly always evokes images of battlefields soaked with blood, providing a grim backdrop for fierce men brandishing weapons. Occasionally, there’s a dragon in need of conquering, but most often, battles consist of people fighting other people over land, political convictions, race, religion, or some convoluted fusion of all these.

But there’s another meaning, one that defines a warrior as an individual who uses the power of clear

thought, nonviolent action, diplomacy, and simple reasoning to effect change in the world around them.

Peaceful warriors come in all shapes and sizes. Rosa Parks, Gandhi, Buddha, Martin Luther King Jr., Jesus, and Harriet Tubman all were warriors. Their recognition of injustice or desire for a better world propelled each, in his or her own time, to take steps that resulted in true transformation. Today, we have exemplary models of peaceful warriorship in our midst: The Dalai Lama, Al Gore, Thich Nhat Hanh, and former President Jimmy Carter have each set an example that grace, reasoning, and a refusal to compromise on deeply held principles really can help change the world.

Proactive nonviolence

Regardless of your personal beliefs about why we're here, the definition of the soul, or whether or not there are karmic contracts that must be played out during our stay, conflict will sometimes be unavoidable. Many philosophers and scholars, as well as spiritual leaders and teachers, maintain that both personal growth and the overall evolution of the human race result from how we choose to deal with conflict. They also make a clear distinction between submissiveness and the choice to not respond to anger with more anger.

"There's a difference between being strong and fearless and being spineless," explains teacher and poet Lama Surya Das, founder of the Dzogchen Meditation Centers, as well as the author of numerous books including *Buddha Is as Buddha Does* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2007). "We shouldn't mistake inner peace and equanimity for indifference or complacency, and it's not often enough that this distinction is made. The Dalai Lama is both an activist and a passivist who teaches that it's not enough to just meditate and pray but that we have to do something in the world."

Historically, there's sobering evidence to support the idea that people who are able to remain non-confrontational are an anomaly; that perhaps we have still not progressed enough as a species to coexist in harmony; and that the evolved beings we have encountered throughout our human history brought us powerful lessons that we have still failed to learn.

Dan Millman is a respected author and lecturer whose many books include *Way of the Peaceful Warrior* (H.J. Kramer Book/New World Library, 2004), *Sacred Journey of the Peaceful Warrior* (H.J. Kramer Book/New World Library, Rev. Ed; 2004), and *Wisdom of the Peaceful Warrior* (H.J. Kramer, 2007) Recently, *Peaceful Warrior*, a major motion picture based on his book, was released by LionsGate Entertainment. He suggests that a good first step in becoming a peaceful warrior is to take full responsibility for both our actions and our reactions.

"In this or any age, we humans have been enrolled in a full-time school called planet earth, and daily life is the classroom," says Millman. "The challenges we meet in the arenas of relationship—with self, others, careers, finances, health, and between nations—provide a form of spiritual weight-lifting to strengthen our spirits.

Eventually, we will learn the lessons of life just as athletes or musicians learn, by making mistakes and seeing the consequences, and making corrections. We are here to live with courage and love, with a peaceful heart and warrior spirit, with our head in the clouds and feet on the ground. We are all peaceful warriors in training."

Walking in one another's shoes

"We forget that behind anger is another human being," reminds teacher, author, and Lakota elder Joseph M. Marshall III. "If we react blindly with our own anger, we are disregarding the truth of that. I think that in any situation, we have to demonstrate the willingness to engage in dialogue. This can lead to the possibility of a different relationship with that person. We learn through talking. Perhaps the other person is having a bad day, or something terrible has happened in their life that is influencing them to behave in a negative or aggressive way. We don't know, but if we can engage in dialog, we may learn something important. Everything can be a learning experience—and if everything doesn't happen for a reason, we have the power to give it a reason."



Anger with balance

Joseph M. Marshall III, Lakota historian and author of *The Lakota Way* (Viking Compass, 2001), *Walking with Grandfather* (Sounds True, 2005), and the inspiring spoken word audio, *Keep Going: The Art of Perseverance* (Sounds True, 2007), reminds us that anger, which both ignites and feeds conflict, is a very natural human emotion. As a member of the Lakota nation, he has seen violent conflict firsthand, including the events that occurred at Wounded Knee in South Dakota in February of 1973. This armed protest included a standoff between federal authorities and members of the American Indian Movement that lasted for 71 days.

“Anger is an interesting aspect of being human,” says Marshall. “For a Lakota person who is aware of history, when we hear stories about the Wounded Knee massacres and the atrocities that were committed, we can’t help but feel anger. When you are wronged, it’s natural to want to inflict pain in response. So, while I have a right to my anger, it should be guided in such a way that it prompts me to understand why these things happened, and to use my anger to tell the story realistically. If I can temper my anger into some semblance of reason and be as objective as possible, perhaps my rational explanations will help others to have an understanding of those events.”

According to Marshall, this applies to all people who have found themselves in conflict or at the receiving end of injustice. “When we find ourselves responding to another’s irrational or misguided anger with anger of our own, we should make every attempt to step away from our own reaction and respond calmly and with compassion—and hope that the other person is willing to listen,” he says. “That is sometimes all that we can really do.”

A shift toward collaboration

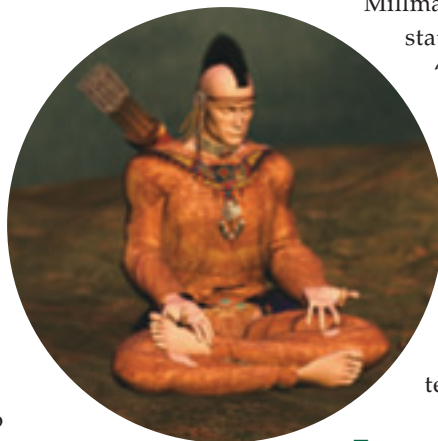
Dedicated yoga practice teaches many things, among them mindfulness. As we progress along our individual yogic paths, we become increasingly aware of the subtleties of our interactions with others, and how our own moods, thoughts, and desires touch and influence those around us. It’s a powerful revelation and one that offers a valuable tool for facilitating a deeper awareness of the issues that face both our planet and our human community.

“People have different beliefs about peace, as if it is a utopian destination where everyone gets along beautifully and the lion lies down with the lamb,” says

Millman. “A beautiful ideal! Ideals are what we strive for; reality reflects who we are now, at this stage in our evolution. Violence is a part of our world—creatures eat other creatures, and volcanoes erupt and great waves crash to shore, and the earth rumbles at times. Our world was born of fire and flood. Yet, if we take a realistic look beyond the constant media inundation, our human world as a whole is less violent than in ancient times. We are evolving slowly, but we are evolving.”

The challenge we currently face, according to Millman, is to make the shift from a competitive state of mind to a more collaborative one.

“This shift is born of the realization of our common humanity and desire to live with mutual respect, support, and safety,” he says. “More enlightened, aware humans have different priorities—about how we spend our financial resources and how to exert positive leverage for change. We are a great experiment on this planet. I’m a short-term pessimist but a long-term optimist.”



Engaged, not enraged

While anger can be a tool for survival, it can also be a catalyst for change. First, it’s essential to recognize the difference between consciously choosing to be angry about something and letting others manipulate us into an angry response. When we let ourselves be goaded into anger, we lose our power and potentially become unable to maintain control over the direction our anger takes.

“Certainly, to every action there is an opposite and equal reaction,” says Marshall. “Responding in kind too often creates a situation that spins out of control. We are a confrontational society; it’s all around us—road rage, fighting. But by giving in to anger, we actually empower others too much. Now, if the barbarians are at our gate and about to overrun us, that’s one thing, but that’s not always the case. An angry response is like anything else, it is a learned behavior.”

Anger is a natural instinct, Marshall points out, prompting us to respond to violence with violence. If someone pushes us, often our first response is to push back.

“But we don’t necessarily have to push back,” explains Marshall, “and that is a powerful decision. We have to learn to consciously make that choice. Everything every day is a choice. We start to think our way is the better way, but arrogance leads to confrontation. The counter-measure is to not always react. We too often think that if we allow someone to back us down, the world will think less of us. Don’t let the world’s perception define who you are as a person. When you

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pause to make a choice about your reaction, you are thinking more clearly and more consciously at the moment than the other person."

In his role as a spiritual leader and teacher, Lama Surya Das operates from the premise that each of us possesses the potential to become a bodhisattva, a peaceful spiritual warrior.

"The virtue of the peaceful warrior is that he or she is guided by wisdom," says Das. "We're all bodhis, living spirits, Buddhas in the making. It's important to remember that anger is an emotion—it is not the same as violence. How we relate to our emotions determines to a large degree how we will respond in any given situation. We don't want to be enraged but rather engaged. We must learn to process our emotions and then choose to respond actively rather than reactively. We have the excellent examples of Martin Luther King Jr. marching and organizing for change, and Jesus throwing the moneychangers from the temple. They were not just passivists. This is an example of the fearless bodhi warrior, not afraid of taking strong measures."

We shouldn't attempt to repress our emotions, advises Das, but instead learn to process our anger. While we may still experience fear and anger, we won't react the same way and will be able to choose the wisest response.

"Check your intentions," says Das. "Strive to cultivate wisdom, awareness, and good motivation. Use and develop your higher, best self. Compassion, empathy, and wisdom go together, along with mindfulness and intention, and the capacity of seeing the other as oneself."

The peaceful warrior

"The way that I teach and live is centered more around how we act in

any given moment than on what we are thinking or feeling," says Millman. "I suggest that our actions have a greater impact on our lives than passing thoughts or emotions. Many people believe that spiritual practice and living well necessarily involves 'fixing our insides' so that we experience only (or mostly) good thoughts and feelings. I believe that we are better off accepting, without resistance, whatever thoughts or feelings may arise as perfectly natural to us in that circumstance—but at the same time, to behave in a positive, constructive manner, in line with our chosen goals."

Acting in such a way, cautions Millman, is not easy. A host of subtle factors, ranging from how well we slept the night before to whether our personal and professional lives are fulfilling, color and influence our moods and reactions from one moment to the next.

"Our beliefs, self-concept, emotions, physical health, and a host of other factors all create tendencies to behave in a particular way," explains Millman. "It takes a warrior spirit to behave with courage, compassion, confidence, and kindness whether or not we are feeling (or thinking) that way. Sometimes, anger arises, sometimes, sadness or joy or excitement or fear or any other feeling. Sometimes, our thoughts and feelings are more positive, and sometimes not. Nonetheless, we can focus on what needs doing, and then act. This is a new way of living; this is the peaceful warrior's way."

Adds Das, "We are the masters, rather than the victims, of our emotions. That's the secret of spiritual mastery—recognizing that while we can't control or change the winds, we can learn to sail and navigate better." 🧘

Contributing editor **Debra Bokur** is a poet, screenwriter, and award-winning journalist whose career has spanned nearly three decades.



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