

五輪 · THE FIVE CIRCLES



THE SWORD AND THE HEARTH

*An essay on the five circles
and the person who becomes whole*

after The Book of Five Rings
by Miyamoto Musashi, 1645

THE FIRE THAT KNOWS

Alin Dragoş

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Alin Dragoş · Reverb · Focşani

Do not merely read, do not memorize, do not copy.

*Lay what is written here inside yourself,
until you know it from your own experience.*

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PROLOGUE

The Cave

A man writing at the end of his life

In the autumn of 1645, an old man climbs a mountain on Kyūshū and enters a cave in order to write. He is sixty-one. He has lived off a single art and taken it to its furthest edge: he fought some sixty times and never lost. He has nothing left to prove and no time left to prove it in — within months he will be dead. He takes up a brush and, in that damp darkness, in the place called Reigandō, the Cave of the Spirit, he writes a short book which he divides into five: Earth, Water, Fire, Wind, Void.

What comes out of there is the strangest thing imaginable: a manual of combat that says almost nothing about combat.

He could have written something else. At thirty he would have written technique: how the sword is held, where the foot lands, what to do when the other man attacks from the right. At sixty you write something different — you write what is left after technique has slipped off your hands like an old glove. What is left is the way you look at things. What is left is what you learned about time, about fear, about the small lies you told yourself. What is left, if you were fortunate, is a measure. The old man in the cave wrote down his measure, and it turned out to be larger than the art it came from.

Why it was a swordsman who wrote it

There is an apparent injustice in the fact that one of the clearest books ever written about how to live has come down to us from a man whose trade was killing. We expect wisdom to arrive from the monastery, the lecture hall, the garden. It often does. But it arrives differently.

A monk can be wrong for fifty years and nobody corrects him. A philosopher can build an entire system on one elegant error and die honoured. And all of us, ordinary people, can be mistaken about our own lives for decades — about the work we chose, about the person we sleep beside, about the reason we get up in the morning — and life has the cruel courtesy to say nothing at all. It lets us be. It defers the bill until we no longer have the means to pay it.

A duel defers nothing. It is the one place where self-deception is punished on the spot. Had the old man lied to himself even once, he would never have reached the cave. That is why his book has a hardness other books do not have: it is the honesty of someone who could not afford a comfortable error. When he says you must know your tools before you raise a wall, he does not mean it as a handsome metaphor. He means it as a man who had seen what happens to those who did not.

And we, who no longer carry swords, have our duels all the same. Only they are not fought once, on a misty morning by a river. They are fought every day, small and silent: against haste, against fear, against noise, against our own stories about ourselves. The “enemy” is no longer a man with a blade. It is everything that pulls you out of your own centre. And unlike the other swordsman, he does not come once. He comes every morning, and generally finds us unprepared.

Five circles, not five lessons

This book is sometimes read as a staircase: Earth first, then Water, and so on upward to the Void, where you arrive and rest, as on a top floor. It is a gentle mistake, but it is a mistake.

The five are not steps. They are five faces of one waking. Earth is how you stand. Water is how you look. Fire is how you begin. Wind is how you tell apart. Void is how you are, once all the others have stopped being things you do. You do not pass through them like rooms, one after another, in order to reach the last. You inhabit all five at once, better or worse — and each one feeds the next. Whoever stands well adapts more easily. Whoever adapts acts more cleanly. Whoever acts cleanly sees more clearly. And whoever sees clearly arrives, at last, free.

That wheel does not close once. It closes and opens again, all your life. Which is why they are circles and not stairs.

Three hundred and eighty years

One thing deserves looking at squarely before we go on: this book had no business surviving.

It was written by a man on an island, in a language nobody else spoke, about a trade that would vanish entirely within two hundred years. Everything technical in it became useless. Nobody needs to know how to hold a long sword in the right hand and a short one in the left. And yet, over the last century, it has been translated into every major language on earth and read by people who never touched a blade.

Part of that success is a misunderstanding, and it is fair to say so. In the 1980s it was sold as a manual of corporate strategy — a book about winning markets, defeating competitors, imposing your will on the world. Read that way, it is a mediocre book; there are infinitely better military treatises on the subject, written by men who had commanded armies rather than by a solitary vagrant who fought on bridges.

What kept the book alive is something else, and that something has nothing to do with winning.

The old man's five books are, in fact, an anatomy of attention. They describe, one by one, how a person stands awake, how he looks, how he chooses his moment, how he tells truth from imitation, and how he works once he has stopped supervising himself. That is all. And if such a treatise seems more current now than it did thirty years ago, the reason is unpleasantly simple: attention has never been attacked so systematically as it is today. There exist, at this moment, whole industries built on the science of taking you out of your own centre, and they are better funded than any monastery in history.

So it is not a book about winning. It is a book about not being had. About not being carried — by the other man, by noise, by haste, by fear — and above all about not being carried by yourself, who are the most skilful of them all. A man who cannot be hurried by a kind word and cannot be slowed by a fear is, in any age, a free man. In this one he is close to an anomaly.

Who it is for

It is not a book for men, though it descends from a swordsman. Nor is it a book for women, though one of its two sources reads the five circles from the feminine side of the world.

When we say *masculine* and *feminine* in the pages that follow, we will not be speaking about bodies, and not about roles. We will be speaking about two powers that live in every person, in every moment, in every thing. The Taoists called them yang and yin. The alchemists — Sun and Moon. Tantra called them Shiva and Shakti. Jung found them in us under other names: animus and anima, the inner masculine of the woman, the inner feminine of the man. The Greeks spoke of Logos, the word that structures, and Eros, the bond that joins.

Under any name it is the same polarity: one structures, the other nourishes; one cuts, the other binds; one transcends, the other gives birth. Neither is better. Neither belongs to “men” or to “women”. You carry both, whoever you are — and if you keep one thing only from this whole book, let it be that.

For the sickness of our age is not that we have too much of one principle. It is that we have divorced them inside ourselves. Our masculine has been left without the feminine and has become structure without soul, action without purpose, a blade that cuts even what it should have sheltered. Our feminine has been left without the masculine and has become feeling without a shore, depth without direction, a wave that drowns instead of carrying. We suffer, each in our own fashion, from the same inner divorce — and almost nobody calls it that, because nobody gave us the words.

This book is an attempt to hand the words back.

Two readings and one book

The book you are holding was born out of two others.

The first read the five circles from the deep, from the womanly side of the world: not as a discipline of conquest but as an anatomy of presence. There the sword became presence, and the enemy became everything that tears us out of ourselves. The second read them the other way round: it stripped them of ornament and made them plain and usable — five principles you can put to work on an ordinary Tuesday, with no preparation and no great names.

This essay stands between them — and that is not an accident of publishing. It is the argument of the book.

Because nothing holds without two things at once: the form and the life inside the form. The wall and the fire in the hearth. Law and warmth. Direction and depth. A truth told only beautifully cannot be used; a truth told only practically cannot be loved, and therefore is not remembered. We need both, exactly as a house needs both a beam and a hearth: one raises it, the other makes it habitable. A house with a beam and no hearth is an empty shelter. A hearth without a beam is embers in the rain.

The sword and the hearth. That is what this book is about. The five circles are the five places where you can watch, in turn, how these two things were divided in us — and what happens when they turn back towards one another.

On the title

The book is called *The Sword and the Hearth*, and it is right to say why, since the title is a claim and not an ornament.

The sword is everything that cuts: form, boundary, judgement, initiative, direction, decision. It separates — and without separation there is no order, no truth and no deed. A world without a sword is a world where nothing has an outline and nothing ever ends.

The hearth is everything that keeps warm: rootedness, bond, ripening, empathy, depth, the life that grows. It joins — and without joining there is no house, no meaning, no work carried to its end. A world without a hearth is correct and uninhabitable.

Nearly all the disasters we bring on ourselves come from having only one of the two. The sword without the hearth cuts what should have been protected. The hearth without the sword burns down the house it was warming.

In the old country houses both were present, three paces apart: the blade or the axe on its nail by the door, and the hearth in the middle. Nobody thought them opposites. It was obvious to anyone that the one defends what the other warms, and that a house needs both in order to be a house.

What has been lost since is neither of them. It is their nearness.

What an essay is

A course teaches you. A guide shows you. An essay does something else: it weighs, in front of you, a thing it has not yet entirely mastered. The word comes from the French *essai* — an attempt, a weighing, the first cut into a stone nobody handed you already split. Whoever writes an essay does not come down from the mountain with the tablets of the law. He sits beside you and thinks out loud; and if the work goes well, what you are left with at the end is not what he believed, but something you saw for yourself.

So I will not give you exercises. No steps, no weeks, nothing to tick off. I give you five essays, one for each circle, each of them a single thought carried as far as it can go. At the end of each you will find one sentence, short and bony, which you can take with you if you forget everything else. *The heart of the circle*, I have called it. Those are worth knowing by heart. The rest is the road up to them.

If you do want a cadence, take one essay a week and let it work. Books of this kind are not read, they are inhabited. They go slowly, as everything does that takes root.

How to read this

A word about how the book is built, so you do not have to find it out on your own.

Each of the five essays follows the same road, and the road is itself the argument. It begins with the principle of the circle — what it means, in the simplest possible form. It moves to the two faces of that principle, the one that structures and the one that nourishes. It dwells at length on the shadows, which is to say on what happens to each of the two when it is left alone — and here, if you recognize yourself somewhere, you would do well not to hurry past. At the end comes the gold: what is born when the two turn towards each other.

You will find few pieces of advice and no numbered exercises. What you will find, here and there, is a movement you can make — a question, a test, a small gesture. They are slipped into the text rather than set apart, and that is deliberate: a thing done because you wanted to work differently from a thing done because it was item three.

And at the end of each essay there is a single sentence, gathered and polished until nothing superfluous is left. The heart of the circle. There are five altogether. They can be learned in a morning and used for a lifetime.

One promise and one warning

The promise is small: you will find nothing new here. Nothing about how to live has been invented for some three thousand years; it has been reformulated, forgotten, recalled. All a good book can do is set one exact word where you had a fog — so that the fog lifts, for a moment, long enough to see where you are treading.

The warning is more serious. As you read, you will want this book to make you better. It will not. No book does; it is a claim only bad books make. What a book like this can do is make you more *accurate*: it can give you names for the things inside you that had no names, and some of those names will sting. What you do once you know them is no longer a matter of reading. It belongs to the third circle, to Fire, and no page on earth can light that for you.

The old man in the cave knew this. That is why he ended each of his books with the same impatient injunction, which runs roughly: *do not be content to understand — practise*. He died a few months after setting down the brush. The book remained. The cave can still be visited today: it is small, it is wet, and it has nothing to show. Everything that matters is like that. It looks poor and it lasts.

Let us begin, then, from the bottom. From the earth.

ESSAY ONE · 地 EARTH

Earth

What holds without being seen

In any village on a plain you can tell, after a single winter, which houses were raised by men who dug and which by men who hurried. You cannot tell in the summer they were built — then they are all white, they all smell of lime, they all look equally fine. You tell at the thaw. The ground swells, then settles, and each house speaks the truth about what lies beneath it. One stays straight. The other cracks on the diagonal, from the corner of the window upward, a thin crack the owner will fill three times in three springs without ever once asking himself why it keeps coming back.

Lives are like that. They all look fine in their summer. And the thaw comes to everyone.

The question everything begins from

The old man begins his Way with Earth because nothing stands without a foundation, and because the question of the foundation is the simplest and most merciless there is:

What are you standing on?

Not what you want. Not where you are going. Not what you feel. All of that comes afterwards. First: what you are standing on, right

now, as you read this line. What holds you. What is under your feet when the power goes out and everyone leaves the house and you are alone with yourself on a Sunday evening with no lit screen anywhere.

Most people cannot answer. Not out of stupidity — out of never having been asked. We are used to being asked what we do, not what we stand on. And anyone who has gone unasked a question for long enough comes to believe the question cannot be asked.

Musashi's Book of Earth does not teach you to fight. It teaches you to know the ground. Its injunction is to know the small things and the huge ones, the ones on the surface and the ones in the deep — and the comparison he reaches for is the master carpenter, who sees the whole plan, the timber, the tools and the men before he raises a single wall. A good carpenter knows which plank will hold and which will twist in two years. He does not know it by intuition; he knows it because he has spent enough time among planks.

That is the first move of Earth: a foundation is not a virtue, it is a knowledge. You are not asked to be strong. You are asked to know what you stand on.

Self-knowledge is not confession, it is an inventory

The word “self-knowledge” has been spoiled by overuse. It has come to sound like long sweet introspection, like childhood stories told over and over, like explanations for what we cannot do.

Earth asks for something less romantic and far more useful: an inventory. What I can do. What I cannot. What keeps me awake and what drains me. At what hour of the day I think well, and at what

hour I am a man I would not hire. Which things, done by me, always come out well, and which things, however much I practise, come out mediocre. With whom I am better than I usually am, and with whom I am worse.

The difference between *knowing what you can do* and *believing what you want* is the whole distance between a settled person and one who will collapse someday, spectacularly, to everybody's astonishment. The second state is more pleasant. The first is the only one you can build on.

An inventory is not taken with tenderness, and not with cruelty either. It is taken as in a warehouse: you count what is there, you write down what you counted, you do not argue with the figure. Cruelty towards yourself is only another form of lying — one that passes itself off as honesty, but which exaggerates as much as praise does, merely in the other direction. A man who tells himself he is good for nothing is exactly as far from the truth as one who believes himself a genius. Both have skipped the counting.

And at the end of the inventory no great conclusion about you arrives. Only a piece of ground arrives. Ground on which, at last, something can be built.

The two foundations: the pillar and the soil

Here is where this book parts from the usual manual, because every foundation is made of two things, not one.

The first is **the pillar**. Structure. The boundary. Form, law, the vertical axis rising straight from the crown of the head towards the sky. It is the part that raises the wall, draws the line and says, at the right moment, *this far*. It gives order and a spine. Without it, any life

spills out shapeless: many beginnings, no contour, a multitude of days that add up to nothing.

The second is **the soil**. Rootedness. Belonging, the weight that draws you gently down, the body as home, the presence that inhabits and feeds. The soil does not build the earth — it *is* the earth. It gives warmth, life and weight to the form. Without it, structure remains a very well-made cage.

Almost all of us have one of the two far more developed than the other, and almost all of us take the missing one for a trait of character, when it is in fact a half.

The house with nobody in it. When the pillar is left without the soil, the foundation turns into a fortress of stone. You know it: the perfectly organized life of a man in whom nobody lives any more. The schedule is impeccable, the files are up to date, the rules are kept, the children know exactly when the lights go out. Everything stands and nothing is warm. The house is correctly built and no one wants to come in — not even the one who built it. I have seen such men weep suddenly at fifty, over some minuscule thing, and not understand why. They were weeping because they had lived for twenty years in a building with no hearth.

The house with no walls. When the soil is left without the pillar, the foundation turns into a marsh with no banks. Merging without boundary, *yes* to everything, a house anyone may enter at any hour, in which the host no longer has a room of her own. It is warm there, but you sink. You no longer know where you end and the world begins. Such people are usually loved. They are also exhausted, and they dare not lay that at love's door, so they lay it at the door of tiredness, of the weather, of their age.