

FROM *HOMO SACER* TO THE YOGI:

THE SOMA AS THE AWAKENED SACRED BODY

Dr. Vinod Balakrishnan, Professor

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences National Institute of Technology, Tiruchirapalli, Tamil Nadu, India
vinod@nitt.edu

Swathi Elizabeth Kurian, Research Scholar

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, National Institute of Technology, Tiruchirapalli, Tamil Nadu, India
swathikurian@yahoo.co.in

ABSTRACT: This paper negotiates a few binaries which have been dominants in the Pragmatic philosophy-life relationship. By such an exercise it examines how those dominants can be somaesthetically re-assigned to modify the quality of that relationship. The dominants that express themselves as binaries are the body, the mind and human efficiency. The binaries issuing out of the historically and politically contingent body is the sacred/damned split that Agamben problematizes in *Homo Sacer*. The binary issuing out of the cognitive and semantic fields of the mind would be the consciousness/unconsciousness states. Barry Allen's *Striking Beauty* examines the body-mind compact in four possible states of competence. Finally, the *Yogasutra* of Patanjali is invoked to reconcile the body-mind conundrum that, through a somaesthetic integration of body consciousness and mindfulness vitalizes the individual; so much so that the socially weakened and politically proscribed individual discovers a transformational purpose. The spirit of the somaesthetic intervention lies in an inward movement which aims for a greater focus of energies and clarity of purpose. The tone of theorization must necessarily be one of loud introspection. Hence, it might seem that the paper reads like a monologue while actually it is a dialogue with the self.

The 36th Chamber of Shaolin portrays cinematic situations of somaesthetic cultivation which perspicaciously argue that a beautiful mind and body can be developed through a rigorous somatic education. This education involves both persistent physical training as well as conditioning of mindfulness where the body is opened for self-investigation. The candidate who chooses a somatic education deconstructs the notion of the "beautiful" and establishes that the beauty of a person lies not in his/her appearance alone. It radiates from a person who has a clear purpose for life which ultimately leads him/her to a spiritual illumination. There is nothing more beautiful or sacred than devoting one's life for the wellbeing of fellow beings. Possibility, potentiality and power of the Soma is salvaged to solve the problems that are ethical challenges in the political and social spheres. This paper suggests that a proper somatic training as well as conditioning in mindful awareness can foster inner self-discipline. It also illustrates how body intelligence enables the individual to be dynamically immersed in the ethical and political issues of the state. Somatic awareness and mindfulness are necessary for any performative act, including martial

arts. Its relation to and relevance in everyday life cannot be overstated.

The paper reads the film, *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin* as a Somaesthetic working out of the Greek idea of the "Sacred Man" [the body that is, at the same time, sacred and accursed]; which is also the eponymous image of Giorgio Agamben's study [*Homo Sacer*] of how the individual is, simultaneously, fed the illusion of being liberated and yet compelled under totalizing gestures by the State as the purveyor of power. The paper works out the ambivalence of the Body of the Sacred Man. He defies the State [the king] and hence is culpable of treason and subject to Capital punishment. At the same time, the Sacred Man does so for the state [the people who are crushed and oppressed]. And the people want him to live. The gestures of defiance and sacrifice happen as Somaesthetic performances. The state is the Body politic which is in need of melioration. The hero, San Te, vows to rid the state of suffering by empowering the physical state of its oppressed citizens (teaches them Kung Fu) and, himself, masters the Somaesthetic art towards his Sacred goal: creating 'a brave new world' for the citizens.

Keywords: Homo Sacer, Unconscious Incompetence, Conscious Incompetence, Conscious Competence, Unconscious Competence

The myth of *Homo Sacer*¹ is read, after Agamben's stubbornly political exegesis, as legitimately depicting the situation of the citizen in the socio-political context of the sovereign state. Further, it implicates the state in the project of de-humanizing the individual into a bare-life over which the state has absolute constitutional control and power. This may well be the case with individuals who, as citizens, are by a cruel chance subjected to the dynamics of a state that enforces a sovereign control over the body through the machinery of containment like the law, the police, the security establishment, surveillance and so on. The individual's powerlessness is not negotiated in Agamben as his individual is somaesthetically inert; that powerlessness is exploited to maintain the master-slave paradigm. In the *36th Chamber*, the individual's powerlessness becomes the instrumental cause for negotiating the relationship with the state, and this negotiation is possible only because San Te is somaesthetically energized.

¹ Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford University Press, California. 1998. Print.

Homo Sacer is, after all, a myth. So, it does have enough space for the enterprise of exegesis. Agamben's reading of the sacred/damned binary as the citizen who can be killed but not sacrificed, does not occur in the modern context of citizenship because the idea of sacrifice is anachronistic in modern democracies. However, the only similarity between *Homo Sacer* and the modern citizen is the legal provision to ban the citizen from the state (*bios* to *zous*). In ancient times, citizenship was invested on select individuals on the basis of their ethnicity, class, gender and so on; it was denied to women and children. Such a nominated citizen, when declared a *homo sacer*, (a) has his fundamental rights suspended and (b) his killing is not tantamount to an offence. In the modern state, an individual is born with citizenship that makes him/her a potential *Homo Sacer*, in which the right to kill the citizen is vested only with the state. In an equation that one draws by relating the individual body to the state as an aggregate of individual bodies, one would see how, Agamben, alarmingly, argues for the obvious: the lopsidedness of power in favour of the state which leaves little choice for the citizen but to acquiesce to the forces of coercion. After all, Agamben's theorizing of *Homo Sacer* is to establish how modern democracies degenerate into totalitarian regimes. The body in *Homo Sacer* is the living body which can be killed at will. Bleak though this conclusion is, one needs but to examine the individual citizen as a corporeal body for any possible redemption.

This paper reverses the myth of *Homo Sacer* by privileging the individual body over the state. It invokes the image from biotechnology of the 'totipotent cell' which can exist as the individual with the power to become the organism (the State). The "power" that one associates with the state may as well apply to the individual as a body. If one turns away from the state to see what power resides within the common citizen, one turns away actually, from the state to focus attention on the body that has been ignored, neglected, undermined, even sacrificed at the altar of the state. There are times

in the history of the state where the body of the common citizen was a marginal existence. Ironically, individuals choose to remain so subjugated like living through plagues that are not always caused by rats. Under these circumstances one does not think of asserting oneself as much as one thinks of hiding, dissolving, erasing and anonymizing oneself. These are times when names, as they appear in the records of the state, can spell danger for they give those away who choose to stand up against an oppressive regime. In difficult times, then, the dispirited citizen prefers to be 'unknown' and fears his own name that might be on the black list. The state, on its part, needs such names identified and isolated; sent into exile or erased through a lawful de-capitation.

The condition of citizenship is withdrawn by the state without allowing for the individual to defend himself/herself; their volition is suspended. Agamben does not explicitly say what would be the fate of such a citizen. But from Agamben's context of totalitarianism and the concentration camps, we can understand that, the homosacered individual will always have a desire to return to dignity; from being denationalized to being nationalized. Conversely, the question of the homosacered individual being accepted by the society is irrelevant because the state does not rely on the consent of society to declare one a *homo sacer*. So, society's opinion is of little moment. However, when one re-examines the equation, one finds enough evidence for how oppressive regimes have had to break at some point in their history and they were broken by individuals who first inspired themselves before they inspired others who were desperately seeking liberation from enslavement. Unless the broken body and spirit of the individual is repaired, one is far from the project of breaking the stranglehold of the state. The point of awakening is when the individual examines the causes of his/her powerlessness. They feel a compelling urge to cultivate the body that has been lying fallow, untilled and untrained.

In order to prop up the argument metaphorically, it reads the film, *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin* (1978)². It also reads together the somaesthetic propositions of Richard Shusterman as well as the Eastern somaesthetic maxims of Patanjali's *Yoga Sūtras*³. What unites them like a common thread running through different ideologies is the principle of "cultivation of the body". It is a gradual evolution through *svādhyāya* and *abhyās*: the self-awareness and self-realization that puts one on the road to self-learning. Of course, one does not discount the valuable role of mentors; but they are facilitators in an otherwise lonely journey. Then, there is mindful repetition of one's learned skills; the absorbed practice that leads to perfection. The film depicts the many stages of that perilous journey. Shusterman has spoken about the aesthetics of cultivating the *soma*. While Shusterman works through Western Philosophy to reclaim the lost territory of the body from a state of oppressive rationalism and intellectualization, Patanjali provides the traditional somaesthetic wisdom, which in the east, is not just philosophy, but life itself as it ought to be lived.

This paper reads the film through the philosophy of Kung Fu as laid out by Barry Alen in *Striking Beauty*(2015)⁴. Even when Alen enumerates the benefits of martial arts training as the somaesthetic cultivation through physical exercises which promotes health and enhances endurance and, eventually, leads one to the understanding of the value of self defence, he also traces an evolutionary trajectory of somaesthetic awareness and consciousness, that begins on the margins of the body and moves into the deeper body (body consciousness) and travels further into the awakened mind (mindfulness) to, finally, arrive at the truly enlightened state of "superconsciousness" or the special

kind of concentration which Barry Alen calls *wuxin*: no mind.

In an earlier paper, the authors invoked the four stages of somaesthetic development of the "Peaceful Warrior" as obtain in the *Yoga Sūtras* of Patanjali. These four stages are: the Sleep stage or *Nidrāvasthā*; the Dream stage or *Svapnāvasthā*; the Awakened stage or *Jāgratāvasthā* and finally *Turyāvasthā* or the Superconscious stage. On the frame of Patanjali, the authors superimpose the four stages of consciousness articulated by Alen. The burden of this paper is to extend the logic of the individual as a "Peaceful Warrior" to his/her situation of being a sensitive and valuable microcosm of society. The authors also invoke the image of the totipotent cell in Tissue Culture. The cell, when it acquires all the vital elements that amount to totipotency, ceases to remain an individual cell. On the contrary, it transforms itself into the source of regeneration and revival of the organic system that is, apparently, in a state of disrepair.

The journey of the "Peaceful Warrior" situated in a social relation can be re-configured in terms of somaesthetic competence that the socially committed warrior acquires. In order to revive a social order that is reeling under an oppression regime; a state of enervation when the individuals feel a general sense of despair and drained vitality, one must undertake an adventurous journey like San Te's in *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin*. The journey of San Te is reworked in this paper as happening through four stages of competence. The somaesthetic ideas of Shusterman can be gainfully rephrased using Barry Alen's four stages of the Kung Fu practitioner: 1st Unconscious Incompetence, 2nd Conscious Incompetence, 3rd Conscious Competence, and 4th Unconscious Competence (SB 154).⁵ San Te's four stages of competence also demonstrate how in certain socio-historical situations, especially when totalitarian regimes hold sway, the individual is like a dying cell; too weak to contribute to the life and health of the organism

² *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin*. Directed by Liu Chia-Liang. Hong Kong: Shaw Brothers Studio, 1978. Film.

³ Iyenger, BKS. *Light on the Yoga Sūtras of Patanjali*. Delhi: Indus imprint of Harper Collins, 1993.

⁴ Alan, Barry. *Striking Beauty- A Philosophical Look at the Asian Martial Arts*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015.

⁵ Alan, SB, 154

that is society. In such situations, one finds the argument of Agamben: "Power penetrates subject's very bodies and forms of life (HS 10)⁶; or, Foucault's argument about the ubiquitousness of power that is entrenched in social life, as absolute, incontrovertible pronouncements.

One would have to re-visit Gramsci's position on power, that it is more "nuanced" than the way social scientists have preferred to see it, in order to turn bleak political prognostications of Agamben and Foucault into the historic moments when an individual body can, capturing and galvanizing the collective will of a people, breach hegemonic order and cause a regeneration in the body politik of society.⁷ Emerson reminds us that "every institution is the lengthened shadow of one man" ("Self Reliance")⁸. In our own time, Mahatma Gandhi rose, an individual against the might of an empire and brought it to its knees. And Gandhi, in his own way, was a courageous and enterprising practitioner of the philosophy of Somaesthetics. Einstein's tribute to Mahatma Gandhi on his seventieth birthday also, uncannily, hovers around the somaesthetic construct "such a man as this one ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth."⁹ There is a vindication of the totipotency of the individual in Gramsci that one will have to strain to see in Agamben and Foucault.

So long as one exists in a state of inertia and despondency, one is existing in a state of inaction and purposelessness which is to exist outside one's body; outside one's self. It is a state of not being able to recognize the spiritual and mental power that resides inside the physical body. This state of Unconscious Incompetence is verily the *Nidrāvasthā* or Sleep state that the *Yoga Sūtras* talk about. The individual located in the biopolitical context of Agamben or Foucault is one

whose body is subject to the law that binds every citizen in a lopsided pact where the power resides with the state. With that power, the state can even kill the individual body, depriving it of all sacredness; an abject dispensability. What in Agamben seems like a categorical statement with a frightening finality is only a state of ignorance, unconscious incompetence in Barry Alen. It is not the end; only the beginning of a journey towards totipotency.

For long, the apparent complementarity between law and justice was seen as a fact of nature and only a few have been able to see them as mutually exclusive. Hannah Arendt agrees that Law cannot guarantee justice. She also believes like Machiavelli and Hobbes before her, that power and violence too cannot provide justice. Arendt sees through the fact about many autocratic regimes for whom, "Out of a barrel of [a] gun grows the most effective command, resulting in the most instant and perfect obedience." She, with her clear-sightedness rejoins, "What never can grow out of it is power" (Arendt 1972, 152)¹⁰. For a political philosopher who preceded Agamben and Foucault, she is more plausible when she argues that power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert (143). Although this thought is firmly rooted in a rebel politik, Arendt's prescription for political power to control collective action arises from uncensored consensus; not from the barrel of a gun (Alen 174).¹¹

In order to manufacture "uncensored consenses" individuals like Mahatma Gandhi or San Te, the filmic warrior, must become *Satyagrahis* or knights sworn to defend the truth. Gandhi retreated into a period of studying the country and its sovereign rulers before embarking on his mission of gathering "uncensored consensus" with non-violence. San Te too begins his journey after a period of introspection. He understands that he, like his fellow citizens, has been

⁶ Agamben, HS, 10

⁷ Daldal, Asli. "Power and Ideology in Michael Foucault and Antonio Gramsci: A Comparative Analysis" *Review of History and Political Science*. June 2014. Vol 2. No.2 pp 149-169.

⁸ Emerson, Ralph W, and Stanley Appelbaum. *Self-reliance, and Other Essays*. New York: Dover Publications, 1993.

⁹ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/452888>

¹⁰ Arendt, Hannah. *Crises of the Republic*. San Diego. Harcourt Brace and company. 1972.

¹¹ Alen, SB, 174.

“the production of a biopolitical body [which] is the original activity of the sovereign power” (HS 11)¹². The sovereign, here, is the Manchu government which uses the martial mechanism of Kung Fu to suppress the people. In order to empower oneself like the totipotent cell, San Te must, first, unlock the secrets of Kung Fu.

San Te, like the cell that prepares for a transformational journey, recognizes the need to influence the biopolitical order. The first step in this direction is to see the chaos around him; the mayhem only opens his eyes to the lack of will in the citizens to stand up against an oppressive emperor. The capitulation makes him look at his own body that is powerless to undertake the perilous journey. He decides to run away from the slough of despond (in Bunyan)¹³ to a place where the body, the mind and the spirit can be strengthened and the level of consciousness raised. While, in Agamben, the apostate is degraded from *bios* to *zoe* (a bare life), in Shusterman, the consciousness of the body causes the reversal of that order: one becomes more empowered by consciously submitting to a physical regimen of repairing those practices that militate against the human as one with cosmic dimensions. The physical is a door that must needs be opened. In the case of San Te he realizes the need to, forcibly, open that door by turning up at the gates of the Shaolin Temple.

One must needs cross the threshold of Unconscious Incompetence to realize that sacredness of the body is not a largesse of the state but a state of the awakened mind. The Manchu who swept in from the North, established the Qing Dynasty, also called the Manchu Dynasty, held sway for 268 years from 1644. They had annexed territories to the extent of present day China through brute military power. San Te is a citizen during the reign of the one of the Manchu emperors. In the beginning of the film narrative, San Te’s brother is captured by the sovereign and he is executed in public.

That gesture of public brutality seen through Bordieu, is symbolic of how the sovereign exercises power over the bodies of its citizens. While the executed rebel is apotheosized as a martyr and a hero, the Manchu soldier, through his warning, “You don’t know, who I am”, only underlines the dual position of the sovereign who is “at the same time inside and outside the juridical order” (HS 17)¹⁴. While the sovereign is with the people, his grim warning, simultaneously, locates him outside the people, and above the law.

An elderly citizen, weakened by age and powerlessness reminds the onlookers that “for those are in charge...[they] must be very humble.” The aged man, who finds himself speaking does not realize that his spiritual and mental capitulation happened long before his body gave up. His case proves Agamben’s evaluation that “politicians...want to reduce all constituting power to constituted power” (HS 31)¹⁵. However, one voice from the crowd thinks aloud which amounts to challenging the status quo, however feeble it seems: “Does man have a right to say what they believe in or must they always do what the government says?” This new spirit must be juxtaposed with the words of the sovereign (the Manchu General) whose idea of crushing the rebels is to “use every method to capture these men and then kill them”. The idea of crushing is a physical gesture of doing violence to the bodies of the rebels. When the rebels are forced into a “state of exception”, they stand up and question the exception by examining their choices. San Te exhorts his fellow citizens with words with the persuasive potency to magnetize “uncensored consensus”: “I think we have choice. Only those who are afraid have no choice”. San Te, thus, crosses the threshold of Unconscious Incompetence by the sovereign. Even when he arrives at Shaolin, he is subjected to a state of exception. In the beginning of the film, we are told: “Shaolin is [a] restricted [place], only monks are allowed.”

¹² Agamben, HS, 11.

¹³ Bunyan, John. *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. London: Simpkin Marshall and co, 1856.

¹⁴ Agamben, HS, 17.

¹⁵ Agamben, HS, 31

Pursued as an outlaw by the sovereign in order to be killed and denied an entry into the Shaolin Temple, San Te resolves to sharpen his purpose. After the death of his father, San Te and his friends travel to the Shaolin Temple. On the way they are engaged by the Manchu soldiers. In the flight that ensues, his friend is killed. He decides to doggedly knock at the gates of the Temple till the monks see his steely determination. San Te makes his journey to the temple, alone, as a "Peaceful Warrior". With nothing more to lose and firm in his purpose, San Te excludes himself from the state, to which he would return at a more opportune moment, in order to become a Homo Sacer in a more positive sense. He is not afraid to lose his life in the process of empowering himself.

San Te understands the crucial importance of his body. It is, at once, a symbol of resistance and regeneration of the existing social order as well as instrument for translating the idea of resistance and regeneration into purposive action. His concern for his people (the state) makes him remove himself from it in order to be located outside; as a visible counter weight to the sovereign. The decision to enter the Shaolin Temple at all costs suggests his new awareness about the sacredness of his own body that must become a political weapon. When the sacred suffuses the body with a heightened purpose, it transforms the body into soma, thereby, empowering it to challenge even the sovereign.

The stage of Conscious Incompetence sets in when San Te sets out for the Shaolin Temple. He is a body that defies all descriptions. He is not a proper citizen. He is, by law, a renegade. He is not yet a hero nor is he the sacrificial body that the sovereign is seeking to be captured and put to death. In fact, the consciousness of his utter vulnerability marks the beginning of the second stage of consciousness. Anyone wishing to please the sovereign, could kill San Te without inviting the charge of murder.

Before arriving at the Temple, San Te immerses completely in the radical thoughts of Master Hao. Though the students are unaware of Master Hao's

revolutionary activities they unquestioningly gravitate towards him for the moral strength he provides. In order to transform himself into an engine of political and social change, San Te realizes the need to be trained at a place where deeper experience can be acquired. The Shaolin Temple, symbolizes such a place where nothing superficial is taught. The students submit themselves body, mind and spirit. Now that kind of complete absorption alone can be a wholesome somatic experience like a wholly aesthetic experience. In "Soma, Self and Society", Shusterman moves on a similar plane of equation: 'As with aesthetic experience, some dimensions of somatic experience wall out a deeply personal response rather than an impersonal satisfaction'.¹⁶

The "deeply personal response" springs only from a somatic plane that is prepared by circumstances, like the ones that harden San Te's resolve, to move his consciousness from without the body inward and, further, into the innermost core. There is a complete identification with the cause; of awakening oneself and, through the built conviction, awakening society at large. One shuts out all other purposes to this one overriding purpose, as one's duty. San Te is reminded by the monk about "Sacrifice.[And] a righteous call for duty."

The idea of "sacrifice" must be placed in perspective. It is the situation of giving oneself, totally and unconditionally to a cause. There is the "idea" itself before sacrifice. The humanity which informs the idea gives it a special dimension requiring of the Peaceful Warrior to internalize and live the idea. There is a phase of cognition involving the mental faculties that are energized to involve the soma for the realization of the higher purpose. The physical body itself undergoes a process of fine tuning like preparing a sensitive instrument. Such a body becomes a highly responsive

¹⁶ Shusterman, Richard. "Soma, Self and Society: Somaesthetics as Pragmatist Meliorism." *Metaphilosophy*, vol. 42 no., 2011, pp. 314-327. doi: 10.1111/j. 1467-9973.2011.01687. x

agent that can accurately read the signs and adequately respond to the needs. While 36th chamber stays on the singular subject of “Shaolin techniques that could be taught [so that]...the people can use it to fight the Manchu troupes”, Shusterman details a more elaborate purpose for the fine-tuned body:

Somaesthetics connotes both the cognitive sharpening of our aesthetics or sensory perception and the artful reshaping of our somatic form and functioning, not simply to make us stronger and more perceptive for our own sensual satisfaction but also to render us more sensitive to the needs of others and more capable of responding to them with effectively willed action. (BC 43)¹⁷

The broad purposes of Somaesthetics as laid out by Shusterman originates at the point of heightened cognitive awareness. It is the point at which the body shakes out of the inertia of sleep and dream states. It wills itself towards a sensory and aesthetic perception that re-works the body and mind on the lines of a higher body consciousness and a finer mindfulness. Needless to say, there are morally firm injunctions, recognized as self-discipline that improves the functionality of the body; re-shapes its physicality. A very significant development when the new purpose takes over is the activation of a transit process; it is a vital movement from an absorption in the self to an expanded consciousness that accommodates others in society as the larger concern. That transition is vital also for the reason that it pushes the individual towards willed action.

While Shusterman speaks of an academic program that “involves social critique and historical inquiry with respect to body norms and practices” one would be able to recognize that a society which has been politically controlled yields clues about those norms and practices [which] both reflect and reinforce through our habits (Soma, Self and Society). San Te’s arrival at the Shaolin Temple suggests the social critique of a historical

situation where political power has compelled the bodies of citizens into habits where the enforced submission as a norm has caused the surrender of self-regulation of choice and willed action. The arrival at the Temple is, by itself, a gesture of defying this historical situation and to commit the body to the recovery of the control that has been wrenched away from the individual citizens.

The arrival at the Shaolin Temple, then, becomes the beginning of new practices that unite body consciousness and mindfulness in every moment of life and in every action. So the transition that Shusterman suggests and which San Te demonstrates results in the closing of the gap between theory and practice. That way, San Te transits from the persecuted individual to the philosopher-warrior for whom the philosophical ideal is harmoniously married to martial action; philosophy and politics merge, each into the other, like a Gramscian complementarity.

The *Yoga Sūtra* too sees the wisdom in action being reinforced with spirituality:

I.20 *śraddhāvīryasmṛtisamādhiprajña
pūrvakaḥitareṣām* (LOY 73)¹⁸

Practice which leads to perfect action must be nourished by trust in the precepts, the confidence in the meaningful outcomes, a vigor of the mindful body together with a keen memory and a power of absorption. The trust, in the *Yoga Sūtras*, is *āśraddhā* which “issues from revelation, faith, confidence and reverence” (75). When the philosopher warrior chooses to consciously empower himself and then become a weapon to eradicate the slumberous complacency of a spiritually effete society, he “transits from an excited but incompetent individual to one who has learned to extract the sacredness and power from the body, thereby, discovering the “Soma” in order to re-engineer the self. This stage marks the beginning of Conscious Competence in San Te.

¹⁷ Shusterman, Richard. *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*. Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 2008.

¹⁸ Iyengar, LOY, 73.

Conscious Competence also begins from a cognitive stage. The initiate, recognizes for the first time that there is a body, which though appears fallow, possesses the fertility to bring latent faculties alive. Kung Fu Philosophy attends to the truth about drills of Shaolin that “serve to put...[one] in touch mentally with our physical selves, so that we no longer remain strangers to our own bodies”. Through these drills which are *abhyas* or mindful repetitive, physical routines, the initiate is able to witness the stages of somatic awakening.

III.15 says: *kramaanyatvam*¹⁹
pariñāmaanyatvehetuḥ. (LOY 200)

That means: Successive Sequential changes cause the distinctive changes in the consciousness (LOY 200). The metaphor of the potter that Iyengar uses is relevant in the present context. The mindful repetition may appear to the casual observer as if the potter is patting a lump of earth. But the trained hands of the potter that beats the clay from the outside and supportively shapes it from the inside is engaged in a creative tension that balances the forces that conjoin aesthetically to form the pot.

Kabirdas, the fifteenth century Sufi poet too has elucidated the qualities of a teacher by invoking the image of the potter at his wheel:²⁰

*Guru kumharsikhkumbhhaj, gathgath
kādhaikhot
Antarhāthsahārdai, bāharbāhaichot*

‘Guru is the *potter*, the disciple is the unbaked *pot*. The Guru, like the potter cures the flaws with care, protecting with one hand from inside while the other hand pounds from the outside’. Shusterman too pays a tribute to his Japanese master by invoking the paradoxical compact of the benign disciplinarian. Bodhidharma, who introduced to the Shaolin monks 18 movements derived from traditional Indian Yoga, was a

benign disciplinarian; like the potter, he was firm with the gesture of beating the body from without even as his other hand went into the mind and soul to provide succor and support. There is a firmness that is needed to shape the body and an equal degree of delicacy needed to shape the mind, so that in their fine balance, the flow of *Chi* energy may be realized.

The film demonstrates the flow of *Chi* in the very first challenge to the novice. The element of desperation enters the process when they realize that one can earn his food only when they cross the moat of water with two sets of bound logs in the middle of the moat that serve as transit options. Unless the novice lands on the other side without getting himself wet, there is no reward of food. The failure to earn his food sharpens San Te’s body and mind to the demands of the task. The secret is to achieve the perfect harmony of speed, balance and weight. While it appears a physical challenge, its mastery requires an equal complement of the mind and spirit. SanTe remembers the words of his master which he must live through praxis: “Balance your movements...keep your foot light...that way you succeed. Now, bear that in mind, it is important”.

The other stages of San Te’s conscious development of competence involve the lifting of a pail of water in each hand that must be emptied into a tank. When the hands bend or slacken from the weight of the pails, the knives attached to his arms cut into the sides causing injury. So, the second challenge is not truly about lifting and balancing of water but requires strength of arms. San Te’s determination to succeed wins the admiration of his master who is surprised to see that “the boy would develop so quickly”.

Yet another stage in San Te’s acquiring conscious competence is the training he receives to develop a quick eye. It not only makes one keener at sighting a threat but also draws the body into responding with sharp reflexes. The novice has to put his face between two smoldering logs that restrain any movement of the face. The consciousness of the face getting scorched with even a slight movement of the head makes one

¹⁹ Ibid, 200.

²⁰ [www. bologi.com/index.cfm?md=](http://www.bologi.com/index.cfm?md=)

move the eyes in tune with the rocking of the lighted candle. The faculties are sharpened not only to respond to physical threats that can be seen, but also to be alert to the shadows that forewarn of threats that must be sensed accurately.

The head-butting challenge is yet another telling routine. It requires the warrior to butt and dislodge a room full of heavy sandbags that are suspended from the ceiling. The first impulse is to give up at a seemingly impossible taste. When San Te is reminded that “without passing, you are not going any higher,” he puts his mind over matter and achieves his goal. It is not to be seen as merely a conquest but interpreted as a movement of body and mind through three distinct stages as differentiated in the *Yoga Sūtras*:²¹

III.13. *etenabhūtendriyeṣu dharmalakṣaṇa
avasthāparināmāḥvyākhyātāḥ*(LOY 194)

San Te progresses through three phases of the mind: the first is a state; the second is a condition and the third is a stage. The first is a state of *dharma* where the consciousness recognizes and accepts the potential for perfection and order that is perennial and ever present. One is always, through mindful action, seeking to attain that perfect order. However, one must mentally mature in order to grasp the demands of such an attainment. The cognitive faculties must expand in order to comprehend accurately the specific details of that condition; each detail must be meticulously attended to reach higher refinement of purposive action. The disciple is awake and mindful of every minute detail that even as there is progress towards perfected action, there is an expanded awareness of arriving at such an elevated state of body consciousness and mindfulness.

Shusterman alludes to these stages relating to the expanding consciousness with the phrase: “the aesthetics of bodily feelings” (BC 112). He is convinced that it is as philosophical a project as any in philosophy as it conjoins the epistemological goals “of self

improvement and of self knowledge” (BC 113)²². Any votary of philosophy as a way of life would recognize in this project the uplifting and transcendent purpose where the ardent initiate sheds the inertia of inaction and complacency to climb the rungs of self-improvement and self-knowledge. Such a humanistic perspective rescues the humanities from being excessive rationalization or mindless Spartanization towards a transcendent stage of cultured somaesthetic transformation. At this stage, the individual develops a greater compassion which enables a humanistic vision that extends his personality beyond the individual towards the empathic recognition of larger purposes like the need for social action. At this stage of expanded consciousness the individual turns into an engine of influence that is equipped with the communicative power to lead by example. The somaesthetically transcendent individual, as an agent of social change, thus attains to what Shusterman calls “the truest and most potent form of transcendence- political action in [the] public world” (BC 91).²³

The film captures the stages that lead to the stage of transcendence attained by San Te through the critical stage of Unconscious Incompetence, when he realizes that he is powerless in an oppressive military regime through Conscious Incompetence, when he reaches the gates of the Shaolin Temple, through Conscious Competence when he empowers himself, body and mind by re-engineering it, till his elevated spirit reminds him of the larger purpose beyond the individual; beyond the use of Kung Fu to defend oneself. The stage of transcendence is indicated by his realization that the qualities of courage, calmness, sound judgement, fluidity of movements and mental freshness can be applied to make life more rewarding and meaningful to ourselves and for other people. He recognizes that beyond the *yin-yang* balance that is achieved by the practice of *Chi*-flow which clears energy blockage, especially at the cellular

²¹ Iyengar, LOY, 194.

²² Shusterman, BC, 113.

²³ Ibid, 91.

and sub-atomic levels, there is a need to address the energy blockage of society whose *yin-yang* balance needs to be restored. San Te, resolved to address the imbalance in the social order identifies himself as that cellular unit that must re-energize society; he enters the final stage of Unconscious Competence.

One wanders at the remarkable speed with which San Te progresses through the 35 Chambers in Shaolin. It can be explained as the degree of single-minded devotion with which he attends to his life in the Temple. He combines mindful repetition (*abhyās*) and austere self – discipline (*anuṣṭhāna*) to transcend the limitations of the body and mind. Barry Alen calls the “striking beauty” of Kung Fu as “Spiritualized Combat Arts” where one does not learn ten thousand techniques but “one technique practiced ten thousand times that makes a formidable fighter(SB 151)²⁴. Shusterman too attests to the attainment of spiritual transcendence when he qualifies the somaesthetic transformation as “a quest purchased by learning and mastering one’s soma and refining it into a vessel of experienced beauty so that one can attain still greater powers and joys potentially within us—a higher self, perhaps even a divine spirit or oversoul”(BC 44)²⁵.

San Te, in his final encounter with his master, fights with a weapon he invents. The chief abbot tells the others it is “some fiery weapon he made himself”. It must be seen as a prelude to San Te himself becoming a weapon, like the one he invented to fight his master, which society can use to free itself of the clutches of suppression. After overcoming his master, San Te asks of the Abbot the permission to start the 36th Chamber of Shaolin. Such a chamber never existed because it is not to be found in the Shaolin Temple. On the contrary it is the field outside the Temple walls, the society at large which is the 36th Chamber. By reaching out to the helpless citizens and empowering them through his mastery of Kung Fu, San Te goes beyond the needs of the individual.

Shusterman has configured a state where everyone is somaesthetically empowered; exactly the way San Te envisions the 36th Chamber. He tells the monks, “Shaolin skills I can find here, and in my view, that’s a great pity. I think Shaolin techniques should be available for all. So that’s my idea for a new chamber to teach the martial arts”. The monks are eventually persuaded to see San Te’s higher purpose and permit him to take Shaolin’s knowledge beyond the Temple walls in order to rescue his brethren.

Shusterman can be seen in alignment with San Te’s purpose when he says “full liberation cannot be achieved merely by the means of isolated individuals engaging in somatic cultivation (BC 89)²⁶. By going beyond the walls, beyond himself as an individual and dedicating his life for the re-engineering of society, San Te transforms himself from a homosacer to a yogi. He attains to a stage of Unconscious Competence where he becomes the medium and the message; not merely the vessel that holds the soma but the epitome of soma itself by being the most credible example of the living, sentient, purposive body.

²⁴ Alan, SB, 151.

²⁵ Shusterman, BC, 44.

²⁶ Ibid, 89.