

THE QUIET MASTER

Filmmaker Jon Braeley's Journeys Into the Heart of Asia

by soren patrick xavier



BIRTH OF AN IDEA

A young Jon Braeley first crossed the threshold of a karate *dojo* in the 1970s while growing up in Sheffield, Yorkshire, England. He remembers a rough childhood—five kids and a single mother, all on government assistance, growing up in a poor, gang-infested neighborhood—and the martial arts brought order and confidence to his life.

He was inspired by Bruce Lee and the *Kung Fu* TV show, and the way in which his brothers' band manager took him under his wing and began teaching him karate at the local YMCA. Fighting skills were important in his rough, working-class neighborhood, and he joined a *shukokai* karate club when he was 18. In addition to learning how to kick and punch, he embraced the social benefits of the martial arts, which allowed him to make connections with people from outside his neighborhood.

Braeley quickly gained exposure to other styles—includ-

ing *aikido*, *wing chun* and tai chi—laying the foundation for a lifelong interest in the subject.

He moved to the United States in 1989, living first in New York and later relocating to Miami. Amid this atmosphere of change, in 2002 he took a look at the martial arts scene and noticed that it, too, had evolved significantly from what it was in the 1970s.

"*The Empty Mind* was a reply to what was happening at the time eight years ago," he says. "MMA was all you heard about, and I just wanted to remind people where it all came from and that traditional martial arts can impart more than just fighting skill. It's about the teacher and the student passing along knowledge, and not just winning trophies."

For Braeley, the modern fighting arts have, in a sense, lost their way in that they fail to emphasize the philosophical and spiritual underpinnings of their precursors. "My focus

Somewhere between the overwrought excess of a Hollywood action flick and the meditative silence of a Buddhist temple lie the documentaries of Jon Braeley.

An architect and photographer turned filmmaker, Braeley released the first work from his Empty Mind Films production company in 2004. Appropriately titled *The Empty Mind*, it was both simple and extraordinarily ambitious in concept: Strike out across Japan and China, film the top masters of the martial arts and connect them in a single movie. "I look back and just whistle," Braeley says today when reflecting on the scope of the project.

The Empty Mind was only the first in a series of documentaries to come out of the studio. Most have an explicit focus on the martial arts, such as *Chen Village*, one of the company's most popular films, about a small town in China that harbors 3,000 residents, 2,500 of whom practice *tai chi chuan*. A few zoom in on Eastern spirituality, such as *The Zen Mind*, an inside look at the Zen study centers and monasteries of Japan.

Throughout all his films, Braeley strives to respect his subjects and show a reverence and warmth that's often missing from the documentaries pumped out by larger studios. He says his highest goal is to portray the essence of the arts. He seeks to show not only the mastery of physical feats but also the successful union of the philosophical, spiritual and physical in the lives of the practitioners.

is on traditional martial arts because they carry through to philosophy," he says. "To me, there's very little room in the modern martial arts for spirituality, but if you look at the traditional martial arts, you can't ignore the spiritual and philosophical aspects."

It is, in part, this emphasis on the inner development of the martial artist that sets Braeley's films apart from those of his contemporaries.

Realism is another way in which they differ. He eschews flashy graphics and the presentation of the arts as a spectacle of action and excitement. In his view, the truth is far more mundane. "The actual practice of martial arts is not exciting at all," he says. "You don't go to the dojo or the gym and think, This is really going to be a blast! Because you're doing it every day." Instead, he and his crew seek to show the practical aspects of what it's like to be a martial artist.

Ultimately, the goal of Empty Mind Films is to open a window into the martial way of life and show it for what it is. Braeley says it's unnecessary to over-dramatize the subject because beauty, power and mystique lie in the truth. To pry open that window, he's brought many top Asian masters to the screen.



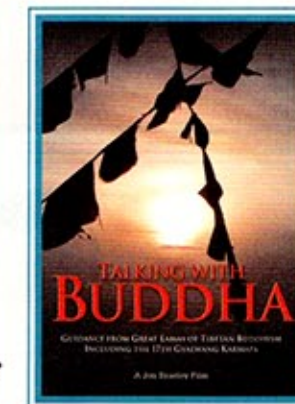
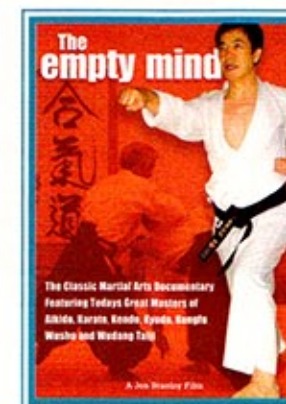
WALKING WITH MASTERS

Braeley recalls the effect a particular karate master had on one of his crew members while they were at the Japan Karate Association headquarters in Tokyo:

"I was at the JKA to film [renowned *kumite* fighter and instructor] Masahiko Tanaka, and we were in a tiny 8-foot-wide office when he stepped inside. He was so powerful with a huge presence. My audio guy Marc, who was a first *dan*—all of my crew members are black belts—got so nervous he had to leave the building. He was dripping in sweat. We went to a nearby cafe so he could dry his clothes."

He tells another story from China, on the way to Shaolin Temple: "The bus was thick with cigarette smoke, and I was coughing. And then a Chinese guy stood up—really impressive authority. He walked to the middle of the bus and snatched a cigarette from a passenger and [told him] to stop smoking. He just froze, and everybody opened the windows. Turns out he was Shaolin monk Shi De Ru, known as 'Iron Leg' in China. He took me to the temple and introduced me to everyone. It was great timing."

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Empty Mind Films has two untitled projects in the nascent stages of production. The first, a documentary on *wing chun*, is expected to be shot largely on the rooftops of Hong Kong. The second tells the story of an 8-year-old American boy who's been accepted into the Chinese-only kung fu program at Shaolin Temple. For updates, visit emptymindfilms.com.

Once he opens up, Braeley can talk for hours about the things he's seen and the masters he's met. From Tanaka and Iron Leg to the tai chi instructors of Wudang Mountain to the legendary *pa kua* master Ma Chuanxu, he's enjoyed access to many of the martial arts' top practitioners.

Braeley, however, quickly turns philosophical when summing up his experiences: "I think the big thing I take from my memories is the humility shown by the masters."

ON THE HORIZON

With its founder working 12 or more hours a day, six days a week, Empty Mind Films is always active. In its six years of operation, eight feature-length movies have been produced, as well as a handful of short films. At least two projects are in production at any given time, and Braeley promises that several interesting additions to the company's catalog are in the pipeline, including *Art of the Japanese Sword*, *The Natural Way* (about Chinese medicine) and *Zen in the Art of Archery*.

For martial artists—especially those who are into tradition—the birth of Empty Mind Films should be regarded as nothing less than a boon. It gives us glimpses of the highest levels of the traditional arts, and, as Braeley's passion carries him ever deeper into the heart of Asia, it takes us places we otherwise would not be able to visit. ✘

About the author:

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