Peacock Kung Fu



By Graham Butcher

Peacock Kung Fu – By Graham Butcher

Contents

Acknowledgements	1
A Strange Beast	1
A State of Awareness	4
Keep Your Distance	9
A Safe Place to Roost	14
Drastic Action	17
Afterword	22

Acknowledgements

I really did get to know the peahen described in this little book and the lessons contained here did come from my interaction with her. However I would not have been able to recognise the value of what I was learning from this creature if it were not for my study of the martial arts over a period of nearly forty years.

So as well as my peahen teacher I would also like to acknowledge the following humans who have been an great influence on me:

Ivar Hafskjold, my Stav teacher, who first taught me Stav over twenty years ago and has continued to be an inspiration and support ever since.

Geoff Thompson, whose masterclass series of seminars I attended in 2012. Another very inspirational teacher and the original source of to concept of colour coded awareness you will find in chapter 2.

Marc 'the animal' McYoung whose weekend seminar I attended in the spring of 2013. A fascinating seminar and I am particularly grateful for the insights into the different levels of the human brain and the implications these have for self-defence.

For more information on these teachers see my links page at http://www.iceandfire.org/link.html

And to all the other teachers I have trained and

studied with over the years, they have all made their own unique contribution to bringing me to where I am now

Chapter 1 – A Strange Beast

It was just going dark one early Summer evening. I was out in the garden which is surrounded by trees and backs onto a small nature reserve. All was still and quiet until something flew over my head, something that seemed to be beating large wings very hard. Whatever it was landed in a tree twenty feet from the ground and even in the semi-darkness I could see the branch bend under some considerable weight. Then there came a cry which sounded like an old fashioned car horn, the ones with a brass trumpet and a big rubber bulb at the back. Then all went quite and I found myself wondering what kind of monster had arrived in our garden.

The next morning all became clear, strutting around the garden, looking warily around and seeming to inspect everything was a full grown white peahen. peahens are quite big creatures, as big as the peacock but with plain whitish plumage and a much shorter tail. The only real extravagance in their appearance is a little crest of feathers, almost like a miniature crown on the top of their heads. She seemed to see me at the same time as I saw her and she approached the back door. As she peered around the corner she almost seemed to say. “Go on then, offer me some breakfast since I am now living in your garden.”

So I took a piece of bread, pulled it into pieces and threw them on the ground in front of her. She glanced around, checking all angles of approach before pecking up each piece of bread. I tried to get her to take a piece from the palm of my hand, taking a risk on getting pecked by her sharp beak. But she was having none of that and bread had to be put on the ground and I had to retreat at least three feet before she would approach and take it.

It wasn't that she didn't like people or was afraid. Quite the contrary, any time I was in the garden she would come quite close and watch what I was doing. She might patrol around watching my activity from every angle. Or sometimes she just sat still and seemed to enjoy the company, but she always kept her distance and even if at rest there was always an escape route she could take if I or another human got too close to her.

As dusk came she would elevate herself into one of the trees and roost for the night twenty or so feet about the ground. I hesitate to use the word fly out of respect to birds who migrate half way around the world and cross oceans using their wings. Peafowl walk but they can clear a wall or reach the branches of a tree with the assistance of their short but powerful wings. I think it is reasonable to call a peafowls aerial activities assisted leaping rather than actually flying

since the direction is always much more vertical than horizontal.

The peahen resided in the garden for most of that summer, I didn't find out where she came from although inquiries were made at the local animal shelter. They confirmed that they did indeed have peafowl there but didn't actually seem to know if they were missing one or not. It seems that peafowl are not required to sign in and out on any kind of systematic basis. But, as I was to discover, peafowl do value their freedom very highly.

Then in the autumn we didn't see her again. I like to think she went back to her friends and is still happily living there. Or something else may have happened but I will almost certainly never know what it was.

During the time she was resident in the garden my neighbour started referring to her as 'Esmeralda' and I must admit the name fitted.

As I observed my new friend I found myself fascinated by her very sensible approach to personal safety. Peafowl have a short beak and no talons. They would obviously make a very tasty meal for a fox or similar predator. So it is obviously necessary that they take great care not to put themselves in danger. I found myself asking her questions in my mind about her views on self-defence. In the subsequent chapters I

have written the answers which I believe she might have given me if a peahen could talk.

Chapter 2 – A State of Awareness

I thought the peahen wasn't paying attention that morning when I came out into the garden. I was in bare feet so I was moving silently and the bird was over 20 feet away. Also she was tail on to me and pecking at something on the ground. But I had only taken two steps before she raised that crowned head and looked quickly from side to side, then she fixed me with a beady stare and strode majestically towards the back door. The head went quizzically onto one side and I knew the question was. "So where is my piece of bread then?" I obediently went back inside and fetched her a piece, which I then had to break up and put the fragments on the floor.

"I thought I was going to be able to sneak up on you then." I said.

I received a hard stare in return. "Not a chance." she said "You will have to work on your Ninja invisibility skills before you catch me out."

"So is that the secret to your martial arts skills?" I asked, "You are always alert and aware of your surroundings?"

She gulped down quite a large piece of bread, I could see the lump going down her neck. It must be useful

having a gizzard so that you don't need to bother to chew your food.

"We peafowl don't call it 'Martial Arts' we call it staying alive, if I don't see the fox before he sees me I am likely to be his lunch."

"So how do peafowl learn how to be so alert." I asked. "Is it something your mother teaches you?"

"Well if you are not pretty careful from the moment you have hatched out of your egg you probably won't grow very big. " She said after swallowing another piece of bread. "Peachicks are a tasty snack for all kinds of predators, at least when I am this size I only have to worry about foxes and dogs, but that is bad enough, so of course I am careful."

"But how do you know when to be really alert?" I asked "And when should you just to be aware of your surroundings, sometimes you look quite relaxed when you are just sitting nearby."

She took a quick glance around, almost as if to check no one was listening. "Well." She said. "Some human beings use a colour coding system to know which alert state you should be in. We peafowl don't find that method much use because we are colour blind, but as a human being you might find it helpful, and you will have to remind me about the colours."

"Okay." I said. "What is the first state to be in ?"

"As a chick." For a moment there was a far away

look in her eyes as if remembering her mother. “We are taught that you must not completely relax unless you are somewhere really safe and for peafowl that probably means roosting up a tall tree. I will tell you more about roosting later but for the moment lets say that the only time you don’t have to be constantly checking your surroundings is when you can be completely sure you are safe.”

“That sounds like good advice.” I agreed.” Lets call that state ‘code white’ when you know there is nothing to worry about.”

“If you say so.” and the last piece of bread disappeared. “The second state is when you are out and about and you can’t see anything that seems to be a threat but it could appear at any minute. So you look around and you make sure you are always aware of your surroundings, and that is how I see the fox before he sees me, although of course I would prefer not to see a fox at all. That was the state I was in when you thought you could sneak up on me, didn’t work did it?”

“No.” I agreed. “It didn’t, so what shall we call that state of awareness, code yellow for awareness of something that you might see but hasn’t appeared yet.”

“Whatever you like.” and she sat herself down on the wall next to me but still too far away for me to actually touch her. “So the next state of awareness is

when you do see something that might be a threat but it hasn't taken any interest in you yet. So for example if I see a cat I need to know for sure that the cat isn't intending to bother me. Most cats have got more sense than to bother a full grown peafowl but when you are a chick cats can be very dangerous to you. And some cats are just stupid and think they can attack you just because you are a bird."

"And if it is a fox?" I suggested and got the hard stare again.

"Well if it is a fox I would have to be very careful." She said. "I wouldn't take my eyes off it, although foxes are not what they used to be, most of them prefer raiding dustbins rather than actually hunting anything alive. I suppose I should be grateful but it doesn't seem right somehow."

"Yes." I agreed again. "It is tragic the way so many creatures are addicted to junk food these days when they could be eating proper free range poultry."

"Well if you put it like that who cares if foxes live on leftover takeaways, now where were we? Oh yes, our next level is identifying potential threat although nothing has actually happened yet to indicate that the predator is actually interested in you. You had better give that a colour too."

"Lets call the awareness of a potential threat Code Orange."I suggested.

"Oh, orange." The peahen looked interested. "Is that those nice round fruits? Throw me a piece of the peel next time you have one I like to peck a bit of that."

"Of course." I promised. "But what do you do if the fox or the cat start taking a serious interest in you?"

"Well I go to full alert of course." She said as if it were obvious. "I have to make sure the predator doesn't get close enough to do any harm and I have to be sure that I have an escape route."

"Lets call that situation a Code Red." I said. "But what if you don't have an escape route?"

"You have to create one." She said. "But it shouldn't come to that."

"Well how do you keep a safe distance then?" Was my next question.

"One lesson at a time." And she stood up ready to go and attend to other business. "Go and write this lesson down first, awareness at all times, next lesson tomorrow."

So I did as I was told and the piece of bread was ready for the next morning.

Chapter 3 – Keep Your Distance

The back door was open and I was making a cup of tea and this time it was Esmeralda who crept up on me. I saw a crested head peer around the door and then pull sharply back.

"You can come in if you like." I called. But instead she hopped up onto the wall outside and looked at me through the window. I looked at her and she just stared back with her bright little black eyes. So I went outside with a piece of bread. As I got closer she stood up and looked at the bread and looked at me and then at the bread again. I put a piece on the floor for her and she pecked it up and I saw the lump go down her neck.

"Why won't you come in when I invite you?" I asked as I threw another piece of bread down.

"Because it might not be safe." She said pecking the next piece.

"But I am not going to hurt you so what are you afraid of?" I told her.

"I don't know that." She said. "And I don't know who else is in there."

I held out the next piece of bread on my hand and offered it. She just looked at me and didn't even need

to say. 'Put it on the ground, you know I am not going to take if from your hand.'

"Why won't you take the bread from my hand?" I asked anyway.

"Same reason I won't come indoors" She replied. "Too risky."

"I think that is a bit rude." I tried to make my voice sound a little hurt to see what response I received.

"Do I care about being rude or do I care more about not being some predator's lunch?" She looked at me as if I was stupid. "Just common sense if you ask me."

"Maybe to you." I said. "But for human beings it is important to be polite so if someone invites you to come in or offers you something to take from their hand it would be rude to refuse."

"And walk straight into a trap?" She shook her head. "Don't you ever think with that great big brain of yours?"

"And I suppose you haven't got any room for emotions in that tiny head of yours?" I retorted.

"Oh, I have emotions, of course I do, I enjoy being alive, I enjoy seeing what is going on around me, when I have eggs to hatch and peachicks to bring up I care very much about them." I thought for a moment there was a faraway look in her eyes. Then she snapped back. "But I don't care about the feelings of something that might make a meal of me, I care more about

staying alive."

"But humans care about the feelings of other people, we think it is important not to offend people. Even if when the situation might be dangerous." As I said this she shook her head again.

"As I said, not very bright if you ask me." She might have been getting impatient but I still had the rest of the bread so the conversation carried on.

"So don't peafowl care about manners?" I tried?

"Look, I am not being intentionally offensive, I just don't go into places I can't easily get out of and I don't get in grabbing distance when there is no reason to." She let the point sink in for a moment. "I am just asking you to respect my boundaries that's all and I will do the same for you okay?"

"Okay." I agreed. "But don't you feel awkward if it just seems that someone is being friendly and you are being rude?"

Peafowl don't sigh as far as I know but I am sure she would have done if she could have.

"That's monkey brain stuff." She explained. "As a human you have a primate brain which is very concerned with social behaviour and how you relate to other monkeys. I am a bird and my brain is pretty much the same as a lizard and that means I put survival thoughts a long way ahead of worrying about social niceties."

"But I am not a monkey." I objected. "I am a rational human being."

"Yes man cub, you walk on your hind legs, you can talk, make fire and stroll right into town." Sarcasm over she continued the lecture. "Actually your human brain has at least three levels, your reptile brain which is pretty much like mine and that one keeps you alive by managing all the basic functions of the body. Then you have your monkey brain which is obsessed with feelings and all this social nonsense and then you have your human, rational mind which is supposed to make you more sensible than an animal. Not that I see a great deal of evidence of that."

"So." I tried to summarize. "I have a reptile brain that knows how to take care of me like yours does and I have rational human brain which can understand what the sensible thing to do is. But I also have a monkey brain which puts feelings before safety or good sense."

She nodded. "Yes, so if you are going to be safe rely on your lizard brain to protect your body, use your human mind to avoid obvious danger and don't let your emotions confuse you and cause you to make dangerous mistakes."

"So if you are dealing with someone you are not completely sure about make sure you keep a safe distance from them so that they can't grab you or

corner you?"

"Exactly, and don't let your feelings fool you into thinking you are being rude or difficult."

"Lizard and human working together but keep the monkey out of it?"

"If you must have a monkey at all then yes."

"Even if I am being really cool and unemotional how do I keep someone at a safe distance?"

"Just don't let them get too close, keep the distance at all times. If they ask you to come close refuse and don't be embarrassed to tell them to keep their distance."

"But what if they insist on trying to get close?"

"Well, you can always yell 'give me five feet!' that is what prison guards shout at prisoner in American prisons to keep a safe distance."

"If you don't mind me asking, how does a peahen know what happens in American prisons?"

"Not something I want to talk about, but not all my relatives are as well behaved as they should be."

"So the the first principle of safety is awareness at all times and the second one is keeping a safe distance from potential threats. What is next?"

"Have a piece of bread ready for me after supper and I will tell you the next one."

With that she strode off to get on with the business of the day.

Chapter Four - A Safe Place to Roost

The sun was close to setting when Esmeralda strode up to back door. She peered in through the window until she got my attention. Then she backed off and waited patiently for me. I remembered the deal and took a piece of bread outside with me. This time she ate all of it before we began a conversation. Not that it was a conversation really. She just strode off down the garden, looking quickly over her shoulder to make sure I was following. Towards the bottom of the garden, surrounded by thick bushes and near the brook which forms the boundary with the nature reserve Esmeralda stopped and looked up into the tallest tree.

"Could you climb that?" She inquired.

I looked at the smooth bark and the lowest branches which were at least twelve feet from the ground.

"No." I said. "Not without a ladder or some specialist climbing equipment."

"I didn't think so. You might have a monkey mind, but not the climbing ability." Peahens do like to tell it like it is. "And any other animals round here that could?"

"A squirrel." I suggested. "Or possibly a determined

cat."

"Yes, squirrels can be annoying with their chatter, chatter, chatter but they aren't dangerous. If any cat did bother me up there it would find itself coming down again very fast."

"So the point is you can sleep in peace up there?"

"Exactly, you can't be totally aware all the time, you have to be safe in the darkness and you need to sleep peacefully, so I need a safe place to roost."

"That makes sense." I agreed. "So when we have to relax it needs to be in safe roosting place."

"Yes, but don't try it in a tree, when you fell asleep you would fall out." She seemed to be shaking at the thought.

"Are you laughing at the idea of me falling out of a tree when asleep?" I said.

"Don't be silly, what makes you think I have a sense of humour?" I still think she was laughing but she continued. "All you have to do is lock a door and close the window, just make sure you can't be sneaked up on. If you are sitting down somewhere make sure no one could creep up on you from behind, just be sensible where you relax and go into what you called code white."

It was now almost dark so Esmeralda took a leap, flapped her short wings and made a very passable impersonation of a small helicopter until she was

perched on a branch thirty feet above. Then she settled herself down into the crook where the branch met the trunk and looked very much at peace.

Chapter 5 – Drastic Action

I never actually saw Esmeralda come down from her tree. I am sure she was up and about at first light. Then it was the usual ritual, she always seemed to notice when I came into the kitchen and there she was outside of the back door.

"Did you sleep well." I asked as she gulped down her pieces of bread.

"of course, I always do, much better being up a tree than in a stuffy house."

"I will have to take your word for that I am afraid."

She finished off her bread and settled herself down on the wall.

"I have one more question about how you protect yourself" I said.

"You can ask." she replied and there was an implication that it had better be a sensible inquiry.

"I have seen." I said. "How important it is to be aware, keep a safe distance and relax only in safe places but what happens if something goes wrong and you find yourself in danger with no obvious way of escaping?"

"Then you are an idiot and you deserve all that happens to you."

"Well yes, but anyone can make a mistake can't they?"

"Not me." Came the reply and I think she meant it.

"Well maybe you wouldn't but what would you advise for someone who had made a silly mistake?"

"Well." She looked quite thoughtful for a moment as if the concept of such foolishness as to put yourself in danger was quite a difficult idea to grasp. "I suppose you would have to take some kind of drastic action to make sure you escaped."

"What kind of action would you suggest?" I asked. "Fighting back?"

"Not as a first choice no, if you have to peck or scratch someone or hit them with your wings then something has gone seriously wrong and is probably going to get a whole lot worse." She shook her head at the thought of violence. "No, you should take action to make sure you escape."

"Go on give me an example." I pressed her. "You can tell me what you would do."

"We pea fowls don't make mistakes like that." She insisted. "So we don't get to having to do drastic things."

"Go on, it must have happened to someone you know, tell me what they did."

"Well, yes there was an incident I heard about." She conceded. "It was quite a distant relative of mine and

he lived in a garden which belonged to a doctor."

"And what happened?"

"This doctor was very keen on gardening and it was how he relaxed after long days treating sick people. He was very keen on growing vegetables and he had a big vegetable patch where he grew all sorts of delicious things. Apparently my relative and his family would sneak into the vegetable garden and eat bits and pieces of plants but they always made sure they didn't get caught there or eat so much that the doctor noticed."

"I bet he noticed sometimes." I said.

"Yes." She agreed. "But he always blamed the pigeons and the rabbits because he never caught the peafowl actually doing it."

"But one day your relative got careless." I suggested.

"I am ashamed to admit it but he did, but I must emphasize that he was a very distant relative."

"I got that." I confirmed. "So go on."

"There was a greenhouse in the corner of the vegetable garden and the doctor would germinate his seedlings and grow them there until it was time to plant them out." She paused as if girding herself to finish this harrowing tale. "One day in spring the greenhouse was full of trays of delicious little seedlings and my relative couldn't resist going into the greenhouse and pecking up one tasty little seedling

after another. Of course he should have taken one here and one there and got out quickly. But it didn't work like that."

"Did he get greedy?" I suggested. "and careless?"

"That is right." Esmeralda shook her head sadly. "But it is not what you expect of a peacock, it was most uncharacteristic. Anyway my relative was so enjoying eating the plants that he didn't see the doctor had come home from work, walked across his vegetable garden and was standing in the door of the greenhouse."

"I bet he was furious." I said.

"Absolutely." She agreed. "He started shouting about what he was going to do to the peacock and cornered him in the greenhouse and my relative took drastic action."

"What kind of drastic action?"

"What do you think? The only kind a peafowl can take."

"You mean vertical take off, straight up just like you do when you go up into the tree to roost?"

She nodded her head.

"But this was in a greenhouse with a glass roof?"

She nodded again.

"Was anyone hurt?"

She shook her head. "I don't think so, my relative just crashed through the glass, flew over the wall and

went and hid in the woods for a few days, the doctor managed to avoid getting hit by any flying shards."

"But the doctor must have been very angry."

"Yes he was, but there were two peacocks living at his home and he couldn't easily tell which one was which so he didn't know for sure which one to blame." She seemed to be shaking with laughter at that.

"So that is what you mean by drastic action to escape."

"It is the best example I can think of, but no peafowl should get themselves into that situation in the first place."

Afterword

Then one morning Esmeralda wasn't there any more. I don't know what happened. I like to think it got to the breeding season and she decided it was time to go home and raise clutch of chicks. Whatever it was it was a privilege to have had a chance to get to know such a creature and to learn from her.

The lessons I learned from her were very simple. In order to keep yourself safe you need to follow four principles.

First cultivate awareness of your surroundings and practice awareness at all times.

Second cultivate a sense of safe distance and keep possible threats outside of your personal boundaries.

Third when you do rest and relax do so in a safe roosting place. Not up a tree like a peafowl but find somewhere equivalent for you.

Fourth, if you do find yourself trapped in a potentially dangerous situation take action to escape and get free as quickly as you can.

Those are the principles of Peacock Kung Fu as taught to me by a member of the Peafowl tribe, learn, remember, practice and be safe.

What Next?

If you are genuinely interested in training in Stav for Self-defence then please see my teaching calendar page at http://www.iceandfire.org/calendar.html or, if you are within reach of Crewkerne come to the Stav Centre for classes and courses. See http://www.somersetstav.co.uk for full details.