

Why We Train - Part 2

Personal Balance

by

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*“Do you think the Buddha was perfect?
He must have made mistakes just like everyone else.”
- Taisen Deshimaru, 20th century Zen master*

In my first column, two issues ago, I recounted my favorite martial art story. The tale of a talented young warrior struggling with the challenges posed by his wise, stern, unpredictable master. I think this story is so popular in the martial arts because (accurately or not) we all like see a bit of ourselves in both the young warrior, and the old master.

In this, and my next column, I'd like to expand a bit on the themes of the story and share some personal thoughts on the value of traditional martial arts training. Specifically, how do the lessons we learn in an intense traditional environment translate to tools we can use in modern times, facing modern challenges.

For those of you who are wondering, the student finally succeeds. Ultimately, he masters the one aspect of the martial arts he (and we) need the most. No, not new and fancier tricks, not how to move more quickly, or how to wield a deadlier weapon, but rather, he learns *personal balance – the artful way of being*.

In many ways, personal balance (and there are a lot of different terms for this) is really the most important skill that martial arts training offers us. With it, we learn to do something that is both difficult and necessary – integrate two dramatically different approaches to life, into one singularly effective way to live.

First, personal balance makes us acutely aware of our moment-to-moment relationship with the world in the present, giving us the ability to accept reality (what our current status is NOW) – without hesitation. In this way, we remain free of expectations, so that we can deal with danger, bad trouble or good fortune spontaneously decisively. We are able to respond to the immediate - immediately. With the full force of our spirit; and without the hesitation and doubt that puts us in greater danger.

Second, personal balance gives us the confidence and poise to plan and strategize, and ultimately, act, in a way that moves us forward to a better position than we are now. To switch from defense (the position of reacting with out thinking, struggling to get our breath, saving our butt, wondering if well survive), to offensive, where we can strategize and maneuver our opponent (or our situation) to the outcome we want.

In the story of the young warrior, the teacher guides the student through the difficult process of developing personal balance, by teaching him three key martial art lessons. The first of these lessons is *to see solutions*, the second lesson is *to control emotions*, and the third is *to keep a beginner's mind*.

The First Lesson – To See Solutions

We see solutions when we are able to recognize the opportunity that is contained within each crisis – instead of just the difficulty; and to recognize the opening that is hidden within each attack – instead of just the danger. To see solutions we must develop the talent to switch back and forth between “the forest and the trees”, in the blink of an eye.

The essence of learning this skill lies in our ability to accept, what is, while at the same time realizing that where we are (in the best and worst of times), is never our final destination. It is a step on a journey, a moment in time – nothing more.

When life is good, we can take the opportunity to pause, rest, get our bearings, fortify ourselves, have fun, and enjoy what we have. When times are bad or dangerous, we may need to drastically change course, attack, run, hide, or just grit our teeth and persevere. Regardless, the task is the same, see the solutions that are there, recognize the options and act on them – the more decisively the better.

As we learn in training, and the student learned in the story, seeing solutions is difficult when you are caught off guard or blind-sided by the unexpected. Additionally, it is very hard for any of us to see solutions when we feel as if we have been pushed past our limits. How can we possibly hope to *make a plan* when we lack the resources to simply get by from one moment to the next, or the strength to just “come up with something” that will save us?

Training teaches us to ignore the pain, control the fear, and sidestep to two common mind-sets that hamstring us when we attempt to focus on resolving a particular challenge. First, we frequently convince ourselves that there is only one perfect (usually unattainable) solution. While this is hardly ever the case, it does make a vast number of good alternatives *seem* like failures. And second, like a deer frozen in the headlights of an oncoming car, we often come to feel (usually in a blind panic) that there is no solution. Confused and paralyzed, we find ourselves in a kind of free fall – fighting without goals, like a rabbit caught in a trap.

The truth is that usually there are several solutions to any problem and several ways of besting an opponent. As evidence, I offer the following simple, universal, experience. How many times have you struggled to overcome a difficult challenge, worked hard to find the right solution – acted on it, only to look back a year (a month, a week, an hour, even a moment...) later, and said, “Damn! I should have done... something else?”

The Second Lesson – To Control Your Emotions

The old teacher’s second lesson is one of discipline. For us, this means the ability to keep a sense of purpose when we find ourselves “face to face” with tough situations. To deal with a crisis, cope with change, or win a conflict, we need to stay focused on the here, the now, and the task (the solution) at hand – no matter what. Usually and here’s the hard part, this is going to mean controlling three specific, balance breaking emotions: anger, fear and anxiety,

Now, don’t misunderstand, anger, fear, and anxiety, are each valuable parts of being human. They are your “fight or flight” emotions – the ones that flare when you are exposed to danger – you cannot function normally without them, and you don’t want to lose them. And they are related to each other in complex ways. However, as the young warrior in the story finally learns – they are an unwanted hindrance when the only thing that will really save you is being able to act - not plan or feel.

Why? Because, each of these emotions separates you from the present, putting you in a place that is anything but balanced. Briefly, this is how they work:

◆ **Anger traps us in the past.**

Anger locks your attention onto a real, or imagined, event where you were hurt, scared, challenged, or disappointed. When you are angry, your attention focuses on that pain. Your struggle immediately becomes making things “right” and coming to terms with those feelings. Anger can be a flash that comes and goes in half-a-second, or an emotional companion that you have lived with for a lifetime. Regardless, focusing on the feeling of anger keeps you from fully paying attention and reacting in the present.

Try this as you sit and read these words. Think of something that makes you angry. It can be real or imaginary. Now, take a moment and actually let yourself feel the anger. (Just a little bit - go easy. There’s no point in ruining your whole day.) Maybe it’s a small thing: you’ve been insulted, someone cuts you off at an intersection, you spill coffee on yourself while waiting for a job interview, or your favorite restaurant closes. Usually, just stubbing your toe in the dark, losing your keys, or being put on hold when you’re on the phone, is enough to do it for most people. Or, maybe, it’s something big: your boss accuses you of something you didn’t do and threatens to take your job, you are betrayed by your wife, or your child is beaten-up by bullies.

Now, notice: as you feel the anger, you stop thinking of it as an idea, as something distant or as a memory, but rather, you experience it as if it were happening now. Regardless of where you actually are, it becomes your immediate reality. You go somewhere else in your head because anger always becomes the present. When you are angry, you are more aware of what was, and what happened – then you are of what is, and the moment at hand...

There is no balance in anger because you can’t, no matter what, be in two emotional places at once. When you cannot focus on what needs to be done in the present, because you are using what you do in the present to correct or avenge the past – you reduce your options, because you limit your ability to think and to act spontaneously. It destroys your timing.

Next issue, will conclude my discussion on why we train with some comments on fear, anxiety, and the Beauty of the Beginner’s Mind...

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