

Why We Train - Part 3

The Beginner's Mind

by

Edmond Otis

Re-printed courtesy of MASTERS MAGAZINE. Please visit, <http://www.empiremediallc.com>

◆ Fear projects us into the future.

Fear, on the other hand, focuses your attention forward to a place in your imagination where you anticipate being; hurt, scared, challenged, or disappointed.

As you did with anger, try thinking of something that makes you feel afraid. It can be a big fear or small one. It can be immediate, taking only as long as it would for you to hear the squeal of tires, and then jerk your head around to make sure your child isn't in the street. Or, you can use a longer time frame. Maybe think about: being car-jacked, planning to make a speech in front of thousands of people, losing all your money on bad investments, being abandoned by your spouse, or, crashing in an airplane.

Now, notice that the consequences of the fearful thing you imagine happen in some point in the future - not in the present. To actually experience the fear, you must leave the present and go to a place that you have created in your mind – where the “bad thing” is going to happen.

Fear, like anger, takes you out of the present and destroys your ability to respond as effectively as possible to the moment at hand.

◆ Chronic Anxiety keeps us stuck in place.

Chronic anxiety compromises your balance by pulling you back, and forth, between past and future, without ever letting you come to rest in the present. It creates an emotional reality in which you are not adequate to the task of living your own life.

You might think of anxiety as a combination of a fear you can't really identify, combined with anger about something that hasn't actually happened. The result is that you end up stuck in place – incapable of making decisions or developing an effective strategy.

Anxiety is a little harder to experiment with than anger and fear. This is because anxiety bypasses your conscious thoughts, memories and imagination, and rather, manifests itself physiologically, with symptoms that are directly related to your natural “stress response”.

For now, let's try this. Think of a person or a situation that makes you anxious. The key here is that unlike, either anger or fear, *you can't* choose a specific emotional event that has actually happened, or a specific one that is definitely going to happen. Where does that leave you?

Well, try thinking of having a relationship with someone that can affect your daily life, but is so unpredictable that you never know what to expect from them. (Hint, for lots of us, teenage children and aging parents fill this criterion very well.) Or, try focusing on all the little things you need to do, all the things you are responsible for, and all the big things you need to accomplish, but haven't the time for. Or, maybe just think of one or two things that are very important to you, but that you have no control over.

What happens? In order to do any of the above, you are forced to focus on all the things that *might* happen. If you look at this closely, you will find that you become emotionally hyper-vigilant, mentally pacing or spinning in circles – like an animal trapped in a cage.

Ultimately, anxiety focuses your attention on an endless series of life's "what ifs?", and "oh, no's". By emotionally focusing on everything that might happen, you are not able to focus on what is happening, or to plan for what you will do about it.

In a sense martial art training prepares us to deal with emergencies, and is no different from other types of emergency training. I think we can learn something fundamental about controlling our emotions from those who must do just that in their professional lives. Emergency medical personnel, police officers, competitive athletes, soldiers, race car drivers, martial artists, and others, must all learn one important skill – to put their feelings aside, and concentrate entirely on the task at hand. The key? They don't block their balance breaking emotions by holding themselves back from the situation; rather, they do it by immersing themselves fully in action – in *doing the things* that will lead to solutions.

The Final Lesson – Keep “A Beginner’s Mind”.

The first two principles of personal balance that the old master tries to teach the student; *to see solutions* and *to control our emotions*, are easier for some to master than for others. Generally, these are aspects of our personality that can only develop through a combination of experience, discipline and maturity. They are active states that keep us focused and vigilant. The third aspect of personal balance, “*a beginner’s mind*”, however, is different. It is about trust, and appreciation, and openness. It is about the joy of living. In many ways, it is the most elusive of the three. Yet, it is vitally important to the creation of true *personal balance*.

The “beginner’s mind” is a phrase used by martial artists and Zen masters alike. It describes the ability to maintain a sense of wonder and excitement for life’s normal daily events. The beginner’s mind is open to new knowledge and new experiences. It is able to pay total attention to the task at hand, with a lack of ego, defensiveness, or the fear of failure (there is a lot of freedom in not being an expert).

Most importantly, the beginner’s mind is non-defensive about what it knows, and what it doesn’t know. This point alone gives it tremendous practical merit for one simple reason. By being flexible and non-dogmatic, the beginner’s mind is free to approach any challenge, or any problem – from any angle. In a sense, it is programmed – *to see solutions*.

The irony is that as children we are born with a beginner’s mind. Unfortunately, the same combination of life experiences that make it necessary for us to see the solutions to sudden problems, and to control our emotions in emergencies, can harden us, and make us cynical and pessimistic. Ultimately, pessimism and cynicism are exhausting, and as far removed from personal balance as are anger, fear and anxiety

How do we go about developing a beginner’s mind? The first of which is to start consciously taking control of how we approach life and perceive events. For example, I ask my students and clients to perform one simple beginner’s mind task a day – regardless of their circumstances. In fact, I strongly feel that this assignment becomes *more* important, not less, if they feel as if they are fighting for their lives against one of life’s many challenges. The assignment is this: *Take a genuine, daily, interest in something that is not directly related to you, or your current situation.*

Clearly this task can be satisfied in a wide variety of ways – some elaborate, some simple. For example: you can read a section of the paper you don’t usually look at, watch a television show you don’t normally see, read a book you wouldn’t normally read. You can go to a play, or a

concert, or professional wrestling – if those are new to you. Pursue a hobby. Eat somewhere new. Have a conversation where you find out about another person's life. Go to your local courthouse and attend a trial. Go to a local church and sit in the back of a wedding, or, attend a funeral. Feel joy or grief for those people. Take a moment to enjoy something simple: the sunset, a flower, the bark of a tree (or a dog for that matter). Take a different way home. Your options are limitless.

The point is to immerse yourself totally, but briefly, in a new environment. Most importantly, the point is to let down your defenses, and enjoy these adventures for what they are – at that moment, and not for where they can take you, or what they can do for you – in the future.

Really, it is all a variation of what we get to do every time we go to the dojo. We are lucky.

Eventually the young warrior and the master reach the same point. They understand that the ability *to see solutions, to control emotions, and to keep a beginner's mind*, are not separate goals. Rather, they are interrelated aspects of the martial art's fundamental principal – *personal balance*. When mastered, they work seamlessly together to protect you from life's risks, as they allow you to enjoy its gifts. They are the horse, the sword, and the shield that we need to deal with the overwhelming crisis, the unwanted change, and intense conflict, of life. They must come as naturally to us as when slip, and then catch our footing, walking across a wet tile floor.

Edmond Otis, 7th dan, is International Chairman & North America Chief Instructor of the American JKA Karate Association–International (AJKA-I), and Pan-America Regional Chairman WUKO (World Union of Karate-do Organizations).