

Mental Exercises for Martial Arts



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Introduction

In 2017 I wrote a series of essays on some of the exercises I used to help my martial arts and my life. These were published on Facebook, and I recently came across them again. Rather than having you the reader try to hunt them down online, I thought I would gather them together in one place.

So here, for what it's worth, are those articles.

The Monitor

Maybe I will put down some of the mental exercises I've used over the years since it was recently suggested that we need to "talk about it". Now I'm not suggesting that these exercises will heal mental illness, far from it. But they do sometimes work on those "hypochondria of the mind" that I get hold of. Sort of like the worries I get from that same pain I've had in my knee for ten years. I mean worry? It's a rip in the meniscus or some similar thing, there's nothing to worry about, it's damaged, stop worrying.

How do I know without a \$40,000 MRI scan? Because it is an acute pain that happens under certain loads and always consistently. What have I done about it? I asked my doctor if he would put me forward for surgery for a knee that only really bothers me when I'm sitting in seiza and he looked at me like I was a bit thick. He was nice about it when he said "we don't really recommend any kind of surgery if you don't really need it". Nice to see a young person with an old attitude.

Part of why I know the problem, is that I know my knees. I've paid attention to them for many years, as some who read these essays may have noticed themselves. This brings me to the mental equivalent of paying attention.

While I am totally uncertain there is any such thing as "the unconscious" in the Freudian or Jungian sense of the word, as something "other" than the random firings of our brains... as something we can "tap into", I do believe that a lot of our thinking goes on without us noticing it does. Have you ever

said "why did I do that?". If so, you have taken the first step toward figuring out why you did that. If you have never asked and haven't a clue, come on back in ten years or so and let me know if things have changed. You can't fix a problem if you don't know it's there.

Pretty much all the stuff I'm going to talk about is simple, and we'll start with the monitor. Take a small amount of your awareness and put it over your left shoulder. (Or your right, I don't care, mine has always been over my left.) Use that awareness to watch what you are doing, saying, seeing and feeling. This isn't a little angel or devil, don't try to use it as some sort of conscience to control your behaviour, that's not what it is for. It's simply there to watch. With practice you can keep it there even when deeply drunk. Trust me, it's been there through most of my undergrad and grad years and a lot of them were spent looking at the bottom of a beer glass.

What's it for? It's for nothing at all, it doesn't do anything. The purpose of the monitor is to pay attention, to watch. What it watches ends up in your brain somewhere, who cares where, and you can go back to it later when you are trying to figure out what you did, which is the first step to trying to figure out why you did it.

Occasionally you will notice what your monitor is noticing and you may decide not to ride your bicycle on top of the side-rail of the bridge on a rainy night at 2am. But again, that's not what it's for, it's just there to look at you. Watch what you're doing. IT doesn't send messages to you saying "hey that's really stupid". IT is your very own cctv camera, without judgment, something you can review later.

And that's it. Try it if you get the urge, fly it out and in as you see fit, for instance if you're doing a budo kata you can watch from outside without the need for a buddy with a camera. If IT is watching, maybe you can roll your eyes out of your head and look forward toward your opponent.

Just an observation.

Kim Taylor
Jan 28, 2017



The What If Game

To continue our examination of mental exercises we'll talk about the What If game. As I arrived at the coffee shop this morning I must have played this game half a dozen times. The back wiper on the van was up half way when I started the car. What if it was frozen on the window, would I burn out the motor or rip the rubber? What if there's someone walking their dog and I don't notice them as my neck is cranked one way to back out of the driveway, which is very narrow between two houses. What if the light turns amber now, can I stop, how about now, am I committed to the turn now? What if I'm not close enough to the cement marker in the parking space? If I'm too close I'll hear the sickening crunch as the stupid Mazda ground effects plastic gets scraped once more. What if the sign in the parking lot, which has lost two thumbtacks and is flapping in the wind, doesn't get pinned back on the fence? Should I pin it up? What if the sidewalk is slippery? What if the mat gets stuck under the door again and the door sticks open, should I move it?

Most of this constant stream of what if in my head is going on without any help from me, I've done it for as long as I have been alive. It is likely something that you do too, but probably not to the same extent. I suspect it had to do with not triggering the irritation of a rather testy grandmother while I was growing up. You learned to watch your step and curb your tongue. Some bears you just don't poke. Well, I suppose don't poke bears, period.

It's about attention, it's about short term prediction. It's about looking both ways before you cross the street. You think this is obvious to people? You're martial artists, you don't think like other people do, you deal with consequences. At the bottom of the hill where I live is an intersection. At least once a month there is a major crash there, one person heading down the hill "catches the green" as it turns, half way through the intersection they "catch a car" in the side as that other car runs the red coming off a stretch of 4-lane parkway and feeling resentful that they have to go from 80 km/h to zero, "the hell with it I'll run the orange".

If you drive you see this every day. The intersection right outside the window here, has a very short orange and it's educational to see how many near-misses happen per hour as someone tries to "catch the orange" while someone else tries to turn left in front of them. My favourite is the people who honk rather than let up on the gas or maybe even touch the brakes.

What if the stool collapses when I sit down on it? Forgot that one, but I sat down carefully today. I'm heavy, I almost always sit carefully, and yes, I've got the one that tips to one side. I give my family what-for when they flop down on the couch and drive it into the wall, or on the other one and put it into the ever-narrowing virtual hallway behind it. Well it's dad who trips in the middle of the night so of course it's his job to move it back.

You don't need to take special lessons to become more attentive, which is one of the big self-help and New Age things, you just need to develop the habit of saying "what if" in your

head. You start to notice all sorts of things that are out of place or in need of repair. At that point it becomes a conscious choice whether you do something about it or not. I didn't pin the sign back on the fence this morning but I have repaired the stools and replaced the heating grill in the past. I did sweep some broken toothpicks out of the corner of the ledge this morning, Dug them out with a pen and disposed of them because I thought that some kid might sit here and stab itself. I've picked up brooms that have fallen over, straightened mats and all sorts of other things that might have disturbed my coffee. Nothing like an old lady falling down to create excitement, and it only takes four seconds for me to keep things quiet.

Superman!

At other times I might ask someone else (usually a kid, a friend or a student) to do something, explaining what will happen if it doesn't get done. That's a way of teaching this stuff, unfortunately it's also a way of creating an even bigger problem for myself when that "thing" doesn't get done and the disaster happens. It's a poor satisfaction to be able to say "I told you so" when you're re-building the floors because someone didn't learn to keep the door closed.

That sort of teaching isn't doing, and most people really don't want to notice the world around them. Just notice it yourself, teach by example, you'd be surprised at who picks up the broom in the dojo when you provide the example of sweeping every time you come in and it hasn't been done yet.

It's also instructive to see who is thinking "why is sensei wasting class time sweeping the floor when I'm here ready to

learn really important things from him. Just what am I learning by watching him go up and down the floor with a broom?"

What indeed.

Listen around corners

Another, related practice to the "what if", is to listen around corners. I suppose you could say it's "what if someone comes around the corner and smacks into me" but it can be extended to thinking about the unintended consequences of your actions. If you step blindly out into the hallway without any thought to whether someone might be pushing a tray of glassware and a bottle of acid down that very hall, you may be wearing the acid. Or listening to a car come through your passenger side door, come to that, we've talked about this haven't we?

Well, push it to "I really want to get rid of the idiots running this place and so I'm going to vote for this guy that I think has the best chance to defeat the idiots". Were you paying attention? Did you listen to what he was saying? And now you're surprised that you're wearing the acid?

Most people don't listen around corners. That must be the case because I refuse to believe that there are large chunks of people out there who will deliberately step out in front of a bus, expecting it to stop (or maybe not). Some yes, there are some who made it out of childhood without learning much, but large numbers of, frankly, suicidal humans is a thought too frightening for me.

How stupid

A further extension is the how stupid game. That's where you read news stories and say to yourself (don't say this out loud, that would be stupid) "how stupid could that person be?" The point is not to be mean, it's to check to see if you are doing that stupid thing yourself. It's also an exercise to see how that stupid act came to be performed by a person that you will assume is not mentally incapable of making a better decision.

It does no good to say "how stupid" and feel superior. You would only be reinforcing your own stupidity, no you only get to call someone else stupid if you do a self-check and make sure you, 1. know how that stupid decision came to be made and 2. are not making that sort of stupid decision yourself.

If you don't know why someone made a stupid decision, you don't have enough information to decide it's stupid. Go get the information and learn something in the process.

All these techniques are about attention. It's somewhat unhelpful to advise people to "pay attention" if they don't know how to do that. Play the What If game, or listen around corners, or if you have a bit of a mean streak, the How Stupid game. Do these, and your attention will improve and there's a good chance that mean streak will get toned down.

Oh, my coffee is gone.

Kim Taylor
Jan 29, 2017

Bull in a China Shop

Big guys tend to move carefully, mindfully, have you ever noticed? They tend not to snap bolts off when they're tightening them, mostly because they can.

This is how everyone should move if they want to be good swordsmen, or at least that's what it says in the old writings, the Kenjutsu Fushiki Hen by Kimura Kyuho, written about 1764. You'll find it in Chris Hellman's "Samurai Mind" In it he says that you should go through doors quietly, you should answer a question instantly, yes, but not with a fuss. You should get up to answer a call from the boss quickly but put your pen down quietly.

Don't stomp when you walk, don't drag your heels, don't slam doors or wrench at windows.

In short, we would say "don't be a bull in a china shop". And that bull? The font of all science, the Mythbusters, once put a bull in a china shop, they set up shelves in a pen and let a bull wander around between them. No problem. They added several more bulls, still no broken china. You see, bulls, not being busy humans with no thought other than "I should be able to walk around here without bumping into things" actually pay attention to where they are going.

Yesterday in the thrift shop I watched a guy spill a shelf full of stuff onto the floor because he picked something up. "Well, who would put all that crap there all tangled up in the cord! That was pretty stupid". Maybe, someone obviously didn't do a

"what if" on the shelf, but what else is stupid is to yank something off a crowded shelf without care, spilling the whole damned thing on the floor. This was, by the way, about 20 seconds after a woman ten feet away had dropped a glass top from a lamp onto the floor and smashed it.

I mean, warning much? If you'd asked buddy I'm sure he would have said "stupid woman" just before he yanked his own mess down.

This care we're talking about is the grace of the big man, the gentleness of the Heavyweight boxer. If you know that you can do a lot of damage without thinking about it, you tend to think about it.

So be a bull in a china shop, even if you're little and aren't a trained killer who can break arms in a heartbeat. Even if you are scared and want to puff up your fur, don't. Be quiet, move with care, be mindful, not like some neighbourhood tough guy. A Bantam rooster we called those guys, little birds all puffed up and crowing but nothing to them.

The old line from the Western movies comes to mind. "It's the quiet ones you have to watch out for".

So move with care, pay attention to the details. When working on machinery or electronics don't just bend stuff to get at the part you want, assume things went together and will come apart without forcing it. Use the right tool for the job, not everything responds well to a hammer.

My sensei always said that in iaido you should sit like frost settling on the ground and rise like smoke from a fire on a windless day. Kigurai, an assuredness about what you're doing, a quiet competence. This comes from being quietly competent. If you want to see the opposite of this, simply look at the entertainment fighting arts, the Pro Wrestling and the UFC stuff with the bombast and the chest thumping. That's the gorilla speaking, trying to scare off a rival because fighting is costly, you could lose, better to make the display and hope for the best.

The real jungle killers are quiet, efficient. They don't give warnings.

As a beginner in iaido we teach that you show your thumb on the tsuba, you open your sword toward your opponent and give him a chance to back down and we call this "saya no uchi no kachi". At the Oku level of practice, that no longer happens. The opponent lives or dies before we begin to move. The saying no longer means winning while the sword is in the scabbard, by making the other guy back down, it means that his life and death is in my saya, already decided before my sword begins to move.

Beware the quiet man who simply watches while you jump around telling him how you're going to beat him up. He's paying attention, always.

Do I need to explain how moving with care helps you become a better person? Try it for a month and see for yourself. All these techniques I am describing can be tried and thrown out if

they don't work for you.

For now, be that bull in a china shop.

Kim Taylor
Jan 30, 2017



Brutal Self Honesty

This is the fourth installment of a series on the mental exercises that I've used to make it to age 60. This one is probably the most important, if not the most traditional.

The exercise is exactly as it sounds. You must, at all times, without exception, be brutally honest about why you do what you do. I warn you, this will rapidly cause you to admit that you are a jerk. You will probably not like what you find.

So why do it? Remember that unconscious I was speculating about earlier? This is where you dig it out, where you start realizing that there's probably not some underlying, supernatural plane of existence that we tap into with our dreams. There is no predicting the future, no knowing the ultimate purpose of life, no question to 42. There is just a mass of selfish-calculation, recital of cultural spells and group-think that we use to guesstimate what is happening in the world and what we should do about it. This is where we stop saying "I have a feeling" or "it's my intuition" and admit that we're just saying to our kids what our old man said to us. If you've ever said "oh my god I sound like my mother" you are ready for this one.

Why do you do what you do? Why did you say that? Be honest about it, look inward, look at yourself for what you are and while you're at it, look at yourself the way others look at you. Small caveat here, don't think that this will work to figure out why other people do what they do. You can't, you don't have access to their heads, all you can do is assume they are you,

and that's a bad idea. They aren't.

Are you depressed? Why? Can you trace it back to some remark, no, some assumed meaning in a remark someone made when you were feeling a bit insecure? Yes? Then "suck it up buttercup", there's no reason to be depressed.

"I don't know why I'm sad, maybe I should vent about the time I tripped over my puppy", that's how these things are solved in the movie of the week on TV right? Sure, just tell that story on national TV and suddenly you won't be sad any more. Do you honestly believe that? Then try it, if it works, great, but if it doesn't work turn around and work out why you figured it would. What was it that made you buy into the "repeat until cured" thing. Or the "medicate until it goes away" thing.

Sometimes we realize that we've bought into a story that, if we're honest, we didn't believe but we hoped. OK good, you've learned something.

Does all that sound a bit difficult, is rooting around in the icky parts of our brain something that sounds just a bit too radical? It is, after all, mostly about blood, and poo, and sex, and power, and fear of death, back there at the rear of our heads. If we want to start with something a bit easier, maybe get a bit of practice first?

Start with your martial arts practice. Instead of finding excuses for why you can't fix your swing, why not look for the cause instead. If you look close enough you might find that it's your grip, or perhaps it's the way you float your hips at the wrong time. Of course it may be that you resent the hell out of how

sensei just gets on your case when you just know, in your heart of hearts, that you're doing great, there's nothing wrong with your swing at all. Oops, could that be it? Could you just want some validation even though you don't deserve it? Buttercup?

Look for causes. Look for the reason you do things, look for the reason your shoulder hurts, look for the reason you resent your kid. Look without the rose coloured glasses, the feel-good things you want to hear.

Seriously, nobody can see inside your head, only you can do that, so if you don't, how is your shrink going to fix you? How is your doctor going to do anything except hand you some pills that will make you go wheeeee and leave him alone. There is precious little in your head that you will need to sneak up on to see. Your analyst has to sneak up because he doesn't have your access. Do yourself a favour and really look at why you do things.

If you do that, and you try honestly (I mean for months and maybe years, and with assurance from your heart of hearts that you are not fooling yourself), you may just have a chemical imbalance. Now is the time to start bothering the medicos, or if that's too expensive, try a nice pint.

Or try a few less pints. I went straight out of Grade 13 into University and stayed there for 5 semesters straight (3.5 years in total) without a break. Why? No jobs, it being the late '70s and there being nothing like even McDonalds. When I realized I was going a bit crazy I took a semester off and started looking for work. I eventually found a job working at the Elgin Handle factory, where I was dipping tool handles in laquer in an un-

ventilated room. I once stopped myself throwing my coat onto the top of a van. I was going to ride to Vancouver on top of the truck. Why did I stop? I was suddenly paranoid that the truck was not going to Vancouver. (Seriously, it was probably going to the warehouse across town).

I got up for work at 5am, finished around 4pm and went home to eat and then go to the bar where I drank until it closed. After a couple of weeks of this I decided I had a serious mental problem and was heading to the psychiatric hospital to check myself in. A buddy drove by and stopped, we hung out, I sobered up, had a think and decided my problems were chemical and could be solved by a change from the lacquer room to sorting, and maybe a few less pints and a couple hours more sleep.

But up until I actually thought about it I was in the old man's world without the old man's excuse. He was in a war, I was in school for a year or two too long. Not the same thing.

Really not.

Brutal self honesty isn't all bad. It's a lot of fun to listen to some bright bunny accuse you of being something that is about ten-fold nicer than what you actually know you are, and laughing when you were supposed to be crushed.

Despite that, I've probably convinced you that this is a bad idea, but if you're really curious about why you keep shooting yourself in the foot, give an honest self-examination a try.

You may figure it out. Meanwhile, I've half a pint left and know for a fact that the idiot nattering away about politics is not annoying because he's an idiot, but because his mouth is aimed at my right ear, the one that works, and he's distracting me. That's all, no need to go over there and smack him.

See, it works.

Kim Taylor
Jan 30, 2017



Education

One of the best ways to improve your mood is to learn something. Nothing more depressing than the idea that you're going nowhere, so create movement once more by getting smarter. It doesn't matter what, I'm currently teaching myself ink drawing. Over the years I've taught myself a lot of stuff, carpentry, construction, carving, building speakers, that sort of thing. It's easy to learn these days, you don't even have to get off your smart phone, just google it. You can, I guess, go to the instructional videos but personally I find them mostly agonizing. Unless they're doing something I'd never want to do, in which case it's OK entertainment.

What I prefer is not a formula so that I can repeat what someone else has done, I'd rather discover it myself. Let's take the speakers for an instance. The ones most people make are what you find in the stores, a box with a tube. They're called tuned ports and you can find online calculators for them. Plug in the specs of your speaker and you will get the dimensions back. That's great, you can now concentrate on tarding up the box.

Sounds a lot like how most people do their kata doesn't it? Follow directions and buy a new outfit. Well whatever Uke Fune's (floats your boat). Me, I found transmission line designs that people can't seem to stick into a formula, I could make dozens of experiments with my thrift shop speaker parts and figure out some things for myself. After a while I did come up with a sort of formula that told me how long my sound transmission line had to be depending on the diameter of my

speaker. Much more fun than knowing the outcome before firing up the saw. More useful too since I had to figure out why you need a tuned port or a transmission line. I now know a lot about speaker drivers and have renewed my soldering skills and learned just how small the market for good speakers is these days.

The ink drawing I've been doing for three or four days now and I'm just copying stuff I find on the net. A couple decades ago I bought some books (the old internet) and read all about techniques. Now I'm discovering techniques as I need them. More fun. Also fun is using dollar store acrylic black and dollar store paint brushes and paper. In other words, can I achieve results that are as good as proper paper, brushes and ink for pennies?

So if you've learned all there is to learn in your current profession, find something else to learn. Keep that illusion of forward progress going. I say illusion because we are all going to die eventually... which is a positive thing. Look, do you know the sexual perversion that caused your great great grandma to be thrown out of her village a hundred years ago? No? Do you know the first name of your 8 times great granddad who lived 300 years ago? My mother got our family back to 1199 but it's just names on paper. Most of those people, no all of those people will have done embarrassing things, if not downright perverted things, yet I haven't a clue.

So what's stopping you from going out and making a fool of yourself on the dance floor? Or attending an orgy? I mean seriously, so your kids throw you out of the house because you brought three girls and a donkey home, big deal, you'll find

somewhere else to live and in three generations it will be a great family story, in 6 it will be completely forgotten.

I suspect my grandmother of running rum across the lake to the States during their prohibition. I know for a fact she used to smuggle cactus internationally in her bra where she had a mastectomy. She told me so. She once kicked me out of town for bringing a girl home from a party. Two months later she called and asked me why I wasn't visiting.

You're worried about spending eternity in hell being tortured by demons because you had sex out of wedlock? Sorry, can't help you there, if you believe that stuff you really need to stop reading. Probably should drop out of school too, education really is evil, it leads you to doubt your faith.

Sorry, back to education. Especially education in logic and philosophy if you are looking for answers to your mood swings. Last chapter I mentioned brutal self-analysis, that is a lot easier if you can think logically and if you have some background information on how other people have viewed the world and our place in it. You'll discover your own beliefs in there somewhere, as well as the thousands of other ways to live your life, people have created since writing was invented. Misery loves company. It will improve your mood to learn that some ancient Greek dude was worried about exactly the same thing you are currently agonizing over.

"Hell is other people" said one of those philosophy types (supposedly), so get some immunization by learning how those demons on earth manipulate you. Learn about advertising techniques and propaganda (advertising to change behaviour or

belief rather than to sell stuff). "See" it when you see it. You educated types out there may understand what "alternative facts" actually are, and why that phrase was recently used (unwittingly or not). But you are educated. For someone who isn't, that phrase makes perfectly good sense. Common sense. After all, science is just a matter of speculation and consensus and we all know that you can come to a different consensus so... well so alternative facts. It's all relative, there is only one place where you can find absolute truth, right?

Statistics. Figure it out, or at least probability, because we all know that there's lies, damned lies and statistics right? We also know that if the coin flips heads 12 times in a row it's due to flip tails and you'd better double down. (Since when did "double down" become such a popular phrase for the press? Well they'll get over it in a month.)

Probability and statistics are not real. Stories are real. My cousin knows someone who was killed by terrorists here in my country. Therefore terrorism is a terrible problem and we must give up our freedoms to fight and defeat it. Why are we giving up our freedoms and not fighting for our freedoms? Because terrorism is right here, next door where those strange people who sound funny live. The government must be allowed to keep us safe and if that means they get to spy on me, well, I have nothing to hide so why not?

Umm. That's where we are, to be sure, but statistics tell us a very different non-story. The press tells us about a girl who was kidnapped in some country across the ocean and we get worried. Why? Because it's a story. Probability says no problemo dude. Statistics say you are more likely to be killed

by lightning than kidnapped but statistics are not stories.

If you point this out you get the instant echo "even one 'fill in blank' is too many". Really? "Even one (our group) life is one too many". So give up your freedom of speech, your privacy, your protections from being disappeared by your own government to prevent even one life from being lost to "whatever the current monster under the bed (reds under the bed) is"? Let's make this a bit more personal shall we? What about gramps who is at the very end of his life, but you can keep him around for another three weeks if you sell the house and spend your kids' inheritance? Are you willing to ruin your family for three generations just for three weeks of pain for Gramps? Is Gramps willing to see you do that, spend his life long work on three weeks for him at the end of his life?

Did you ask?

What you give up in the "fight against terror" may not be something that your kids will get back when the terror is defeated. Terror is never defeated by the way, because terror is a state of mind. I've lived with terrorists in my country for my entire life. There was never a time when they weren't here. Go educate yourself with some history and then some statistics and see what effect the terrorists had on the country, any country, as compared to the effect the response to terrorism has had. Terrorism is what you use when you can't defeat another country or group. You create a monster under the bed in the hope that the other group beats itself do death trying to get at the monster under that bed.

Yep, some stories are not helpful. Maybe even one life is a shame, maybe even a tragedy, but the attempt to save that one life might just be unwise.

Now, to return to our mood, a little statistical knowledge might help. CNN may be telling you every four minutes that a terrorist has struck again, but should you be terrified? Terrorized? I dunno, is each telling of terror a different terror incident or is it the same one over and over. Maybe the solution to terror is to turn off the TV? Where are the stats? What is my probability? What is a terrorist? Some sad little dude with a gun?

What are the chances that this third cup of coffee will solve my problems?

Kim Taylor
Jan 31, 2017

Distraction

This one you know about, distraction is all around us. There's TV and books and the interweb and a constant, constant barrage of stuff to buy. We say "don't get distracted" like distraction is a bad thing. Is it?

The local mall had an ad campaign a while ago with the tag line "retail therapy". Shopping is, you know. Where else can you go and be sure to have people happy to see you? Not work, not school, often not even home but stores are always happy to see you and this is a mood lifter in and of itself. Face it, you don't go to the mall because you really need a seventeenth pair of jeans. You go because it makes you feel good to see someone smile at you and say thank you. This is why shops still exist, for stuff you actually need there's Amazon but to feel better there's the little shop downtown with the clerk who knows you.

Shopping is OK but for me it's Terry Pratchett in the book category. If I'm re-reading one of his books you can be pretty sure I'm breaking up a cycle of bad thoughts, that something or someone is irritating me. These various places are those that take us away in a story, or dazzle us with pretty things to buy.

There are other distractions, for you and I it's our martial arts classes. These are places that require us to concentrate, which also takes us away from the cycles of thought. We really can't multitask, much as we would like to convince the cop who is taking down our information because we were texting while running a red light. We serially single-track so get off one track

and stay on another long enough to leave that rail loop behind. Go to class and "forget about life for a while" as Mr Rafferty said.

It's important to recognize and break those cycles of thought, some people call them spirals as in "a downward spiral of destructive ideation". Fancy talk for getting stuck in a rut. "When she said this I should have said that and then it would have gone this way but I didn't so it went that way and she said this to which I should have said that and..."

Your mental record is skipping and you need to take it off the turntable before it drives you crazy. Distraction is one way to do this.

It's not a cop-out to sometimes "run from your problems" especially if there's nothing you can do about the situation anyway. If thinking about it won't help why make yourself sad by thinking about it?

How can you tell when you're in one of those cycles? Pay attention to what you're thinking. Is there anything you can do to fix the problem? No, yet it keeps going around in your head? Cycle. Are you thinking about the same thing you were thinking about two hours ago? Is it keeping you from falling asleep? Cycle. Get up and read a couple chapters of a good book and let the girlfriend sleep peacefully for a while.

Some people cycle out loud. I'm the last person to say you should never bitch about your problems, I do it all the time, but keep it to a minimum right? Telling the same person the same sad story for the 7th time isn't helping either of you. Once is for

sympathy (that thing us guys can't figure out, you tell us a story and we tell you how to fix it and you're mad at us because you didn't want a suggestion on how to fix it, you wanted sympathy or some such external validation and confirmation of your sad story). Sorry, once is for sympathy, five times is asking for help, I'm sorry, it is.

Those cycles can be imposed on us. Think about 24 hour news channels cycling through the same six stories all day long. Even if you're not paying attention it seeps into your head, the constant repetition of trigger words that eventually make you anxious and susceptible to suggestion. Reds under the beds. Tourerists! Furriners coming here taking our jobs!! Repetition is one of the oldest forms of propaganda and indoctrination, advertisers will happily tell you that you need to hear a message 7 times before you're likely to act on it. Politicians will repeat their sound bites constantly and eventually their completely irrational claims become normalized.

Switch. The. Channel.

You know this, we practice kata repetitively and we internalize the story. We practice our "fake left and jump shot right" until we do it automatically. Cycles are not different than practice. If you don't rehearse the car accident over and over in your head you may not become fixated on it, you may not suffer PTSD. In this day of "you gotta talk about it" TV psychology we probably should honour the wishes of the guy who says "I don't want to talk about it". He may know what he needs, forgetting is a great healing tool.

If an incident can happen in your childhood, only to be forgotten and then arise 30 years later to send you into a killing spree (probably the plot of a TV show presented this very evening) then why can't we listen to the prof say something in September, forget about it for 8 months (or 30 years) and then have it pop back up to the surface when we need it for the final. Memory doesn't work that way, "use it or lose it", you have to rehearse it to remember it which means that if you can cut off that rehearsal soon enough, if you can break the cycling with some distraction, you stand a good chance of forgetting all about that problem you can't do anything about anyway.

Know why the "cycle of violence" through families is so unpredictable? (That's the thing that says wife abusers watched their dads abuse their mothers.) It's because memes aren't genes. Ideas aren't inherited along with red hair (a certain predictor of a bad temper, surely). Kids watch and learn how to get along, maybe their mom slapped their dad around, maybe lots of moms abused dads in the neighbourhood, that's how people act so that's how the kid acts. But maybe the kid sees alternative modes of interaction, maybe she goes to karate class and learns from Sensei Joe that there are other ways to act. You may inherit sickle cell anemia but you don't inherit the idea that men should obey women, or vice versa. You learn it.

What is repeated is remembered. If you don't want to learn what a sad sack of poo you are, stop cycling those thoughts at 4am. Distract your brain, understand that you are distracting yourself so work at it. Read a couple of chapters don't just say "I should stop thinking about this". Don't think about a pink rhinoceros, just don't.

Well?

How do you get rid of an earworm? Listen to another song.

Blue elephant.

Kim Taylor

Feb 1, 2017



A Few Other Thoughts



Drip, drip, drip

Ah, that was the problem, I wasn't writing because I didn't have a blank screen to look at. Offensive things these blank screens. There is the urge to fill them with words.

Just like there's the urge to fill students' heads with all the wonderful things our martial art can offer. Sometimes though, I wonder if I'm there to offer new ideas or just to chip away the walls they seem to stick in front of their own progress.

You know what I mean don't you? That drip, drip, drip of water percolating down through the limestone that creates stalagmites and stalactites. I just wanted to use those words, probably misspelled them. Did you look them up?

Drip.

The drip of water is their thoughts of course, and the calcium carbonate the water picks up is the preconceptions, the self-doubt, the comments from others about their general skills. In other words, the vague belief that they can't do what they damned well can.

While we're on the cave analogy, let's add the echo of the sound of their own voices repeating criticisms and corrections in their heads.

At some point in your budo career you have to understand that you're just fine. The stuff you do is correct, it's "good enough" and so you can get on with other things, like applying it more

bigly, more strongly, more smoothly, more fastly. While you remain convinced that you can't do it at all, you are doomed to learn it over and over and over again.

Drip, drip.

There's a knack to taking corrections. The first thing is to smile and nod at those who are not your sensei. Now, if what they just said sounds interesting, try it. If not, ignore it politely. Your fellow students are not in charge of your progress unless your sensei tells them they are. In which case listen to them but for the most part, they really ought to be working on their own stuff.

Corrections from your sensei ought to be taken for what they are, orders to change something. Did he tell you to do the exact opposite of what he told you to do last week? What you just told that student beside you to do? Are you embarrassed now because he slapped your nose?

Get out of your own way, unless he just said "and don't be telling beginners that crap" he may simply be telling you to do it this other way now that you've learned the lesson he gave you last week. The one you just gave the guy beside you. Just do what he tells you to do today and later compare it to what you did last week. You may see something.

Of course there's always the chance that Sensei is losing it, that the dementia has kicked in and he really does need you to tell him what he told you last week. This might get you a lecture on why he told you that then and why he's telling you this now, or he might just say "Oh, right, do it the way I told you to do it

last week" and walk away.

And now you know why some martial arts take 30 years to learn, and why some take 30 days.

Then there is the sensei who just tells you stuff to tear you down. If that's so, why are you still there? You don't even have the excuse of having kids with him and being financially dependent on him and...

Just get out of your own way before the drip, drip, drip of his words poisons your soul.

Dramatic much?

If you trust your sensei, don't think, just do. "Relax your shoulders" should result in your shoulders relaxing, not a response like "they are relaxed, that's as relaxed as I can make them" or "am I still doing that?" Seriously dude, if sensei says you're doing it do you really need a second opinion, from the same person, to confirm you're doing what he just said you're doing?

That's you getting in your own way.

Your response should be to relax your shoulders, and then when you notice your shoulders up around your ears the next time you do the kata, drop them, don't tsk tsk and sigh and make a fuss and look over toward sensei to see if he's about to tell you to relax them again. He saw, of course he saw, and he's waiting for you to relax them, he's not waiting for you to shout across the room "oh, I'm still doing it!"

Got eyes. Don't need to hear the drip drip of you getting in your own way.

Kim Taylor
Feb 2, 2017



Eliminate the Extraneous

One of my key instructions to myself in iaido is to get rid of any extra movements, time or twitches. Shave all the extraneous stuff out of a kata and it takes less time to perform without speeding up. The key is efficiency not rushing. You don't need to be faster, just fast enough.

How does this help us in our daily life? Well the same principle can be used in every instance that we use our hands of course. In the shop I batch work when I can, change tooling only when I have to, that sort of thing. That's not a secret, it's the second phase in the industrial revolution, the first being steam power to replace muscles for the heavy lifting. Assembly lines were much more efficient, if somewhat dehumanizing, in fact we are well into the ultimate dehumanizing phase of assembly with robotics.

From a mental point of view the same search for efficiency works quite well. The thing that "mushin" works against, the mind that no-mind responds to is a scattered, ragged, multitracking ball of drier lint (go ahead, follow the threads if you dare). Just as we pare down the physical twitches in a kata, we should pare down the extraneous in our thoughts in order to get to the essential. This is Occum's Razor in it's active form. "The simplest explanation is usually correct" becomes "get rid of all the extra bits and find the simple".

Pare away the extra fluff to reveal the solid thread at the core of your thought.

How do you know you're on the right track? Can you explain your thesis to your mother in three sentences or less?

Can your mother figure out what you're doing when you flail your sword around in the air?

KISS (stop writing)

Kim Taylor
Oct 13, 2015



Kasso Teki

I don't know if it's the humidity here on the east coast but the first evening of the seminar here in Antigonish featured two diatribes on spirituality in iaido.

I honestly can't remember the first, we've been out for beer. The second was all about kasso teki. He's the guy who is the opponent in iaido of course. He looks like you, he sounds like you, in fact, Bill Mears used to say that he was everything about you that you didn't like. All the terrible things you do and say that you wish you didn't.

Oh, and for a beginner, he's just a little bit too slow and stupid to ever win, so each time you do a kata you kill a little bit of what you don't like about yourself.

Cool eh?

Kasso teki has to be a bit less skilled than your beginner self because otherwise you won't learn. Think of your badminton instructor, you know, the one who is an all-state champion, who can send you home black and blue like a trip to the local.... never mind, the guy who can send you home black and blue from birdie bites. What would you learn if he just screamed them past you from hour one? Nothing? Absolutely, nothing. To begin with he's got to lob them over the net so that you can learn to return them. He's got to lose to you, just like kasso teki. Think of this like your invisible opponent is lobbing, oh, I dunno, your cigarette habit over the net. Not too hard to beat that one is it Mr. ashtray licking kisser?

But eventually you learn the basics of badminton (or iaido) and it gets a bit easy to beat your simple self, you know, the nasty habits you want to get rid of anyway. Eventually you get on to stuff like "beer: drinking too much thereof". Oh yes, now your kasso teki is just a little bit better than you. This is your badminton coach staying just a tiny bit ahead of your skill level so that you learn. You have to learn or you end up getting beaten over and over again. So you try hard and you catch up a bit and he stays a bit ahead of you.

This is most of your iaido career, your imaginary opponent remains a bit better than you are, and you get a bit better for trying to stay alive, for having to struggle to beat him day in and day out.

But that's only most of your career. Eventually kasso teki gets mean and nasty. Around when you're old, let's say sometime when you feel like I do most of the time, perhaps when you're 70 or so, kasso teki ends up being your 18 year old self. Young, healthy, full of wastewater and acidic substances (piss and vinagre I think I mean), and he can wipe the floor with you. In fact, kasso teki does wipe the floor with you. Every time you step into the dojo you notice you are another step behind, that it takes a few seconds less time for your younger self to defeat your present self.

You move from humiliation to humiliation every practice.

And yet, knowing that you are beaten and will be beaten you show up in the dojo and put your sword in your belt. You do it knowing your students can see your weakness, you do it

knowing they see you defeated each and every kata you perform. You do it simply through the sheer effort of will it takes to be beaten but still show up for practice.

This is all you have to give your students eventually, your example of going on in spite of losing a bit sooner, a bit worse every day. Of losing to the swordsman you once were, but showing up anyway to be beaten again. It is this spiritual determination, this mental toughness that you can give, all you can give, and you give it every day.

This is the joy of iai, the ability of old men to continue past the time when they would have been chased from the dojo by the young bucks in sports where the opponent is real, not invisible, not one's self. Physical abuse of the body, bruises and breaks will stop an old man's career simply because the body can't take it, even if the mind can, the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. Past this place, the kasso teki of iaido will allow these old warriors a few more years to be battered but not quite beaten in spirit.

I hope I can be one of them when my time comes.

Kim Taylor

Jan 30, 2015 Antigonish, Nova Scotia

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