

Pathways

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CONTENTS

Getting on the Road	1
Perception	2
Concentration	3
Transformation.....	4

*“I skate to
where the puck
will be”*

—Wayne Gretsky

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Getting on the Road

The longer I stay in the martial arts, the more I realize that what we teach really has little to do with kicking, punching, throwing, or joint locking. In reality we are dealing with personal transformation. The martial arts are a vehicle or a tool through which the transformation occurs.

The first implication of this observation is that when you start the martial arts, you are **not** purchasing martial skill, you are really purchasing the benefits to be gained from training. When you start, the benefits you are looking for might be improved fitness, weight loss, stress management, depression management, increased sense of personal security, an activity that challenges you in a new way, a new social group, a sense of connection or belonging to a group of like-minded people, an ill-defined itch that you can't seem to scratch.... the reasons are many and varied.

But whatever the reason **is** that gets you started down the road, it is unlikely to be the reason that keeps you traveling in the long term. Sooner or later we **are** fitter or less stressed or feel personally secure. So if we have achieved the goal we set out to achieve, why keep going? Another thing to factor in here is that whatever the motivation was to get started, we made impressive progress early on and the improvements become smaller over time. Let's take physical fitness as an example. From a simplistic perspective, if you start a physical activity after leading a sedentary lifestyle, you will find that the body adapts pretty quickly and if you combine the physical activity with a

healthy diet you soon find yourself to be much healthier. Maintenance is easy at that point, but making further improvement is harder. This is why it is easier for a novice athlete to improve but harder for an elite athlete to make big gains in performance. We see this at the Olympic level when the difference between a Gold and Silver medal might be measured in parts of a second.

So it comes to this: We get started for one reason, but as we progress, our reasons evolve along with our awareness. What we think we want at the outset is not what we discover to be the real goal further down the road. So as we train we become more aware of things that were previously invisible to us. I like to use the analogy that Jay Abraham uses in discussing business marketing: It's difficult to see your opportunities, if you don't know your options.

As our awareness changes, our concentration deepens, we become more focused upon what it is we are seeking and more deliberate about the steps that we take to get there.

Finally, along with the awareness and the concentration comes the inevitable transformation.

So this newsletter is dedicated to a discussion of these three aspects of why we study martial arts:

- Changes in how we perceive ourselves and our world
- Changes in how we focus and concentrate, and
- The inevitable resultant transformations that occur in our lives.☺

Perception

Perception is an interesting thing. No matter what you perceive to be reality, it is for you, reality. It really doesn't matter whether or not your perception of reality is in tune with everyone else's around you. Your reality is based upon your memory and your experience. Perception becomes ingrained through experience and our memory of experience. Let's say I have a friend who adamantly believes in his version of how things transpired in the past. It is his perception, and from my perspective his view of things is radically different to mine... we have different perceptions.

Now bring the analogy home to your own persona. Could it be that your perception of who you are and what potentials lie hidden within you is at odds with the truth?

When I watch people begin the martial arts I hear the lies we have told ourselves since we were children: "I can't do that" or "I'll try". Slowly as our beginners overcome the physical and mental hurdles one at a time, their perceptions of what is possible change and they make a commitment to the process of change.

When we begin the martial arts we have no idea what our options are. We have no previous experience and we step into an "undiscovered country," where the rules we have built for ourselves don't seem to apply. As we begin to achieve success we see the improvements we are making in strength, balance, coordination and focus. We sometimes get a view of ourselves as we were, just as we become aware of how we are changing. I hear things like: "Wow, I never thought I could do that" or "You know, before, I could only do ____". So perception changes. We become more aware.

As we increase our internal awareness, some other things happen around us. We begin to become aware of the community with which we are

studying and growing. We begin to gain an awareness that it is a synergistic community dedicated to group improvement, not just personal improvement. At some point in the process martial artists realize that what they are doing is no longer about them, it's about the people with whom they rub shoulders everyday. It's about becoming a better person so that we each become a better tool of humanity, a more able steward of the resources that we manage.

As training continues, awareness can take some interesting turns, when unexpected insights occur that cause us to re-evaluate our entire view of things. I have said this before: At higher levels of awareness, previous truths become erroneous and higher truths appear.

I often think that the awareness change occurs in the very first class. Martial arts training is a socio-economic leveler. We put on strange outfits and no-one knows if you are unemployed or a bank president. No one cares. We are all here, now, together to learn; to push the boundaries of our personal experience into some new field of endeavor. We bond as a group and accept each other as we are, not for any status we might have in the "real world."

Which brings up a neat point. The world of the martial arts school is a world apart, and when we enter that world, we drop the baggage of the other world to concentrate on our training. Initially, dropping the baggage is an unconscious event that happens because we get absorbed by the training. Later, perhaps in the middle ranks, we consciously drop the baggage when we begin class and we are acutely aware of nights when we have failed to let the stresses of the day drop away. We don't have such a good class and our concentration is not the best. Later still, we again return to the beginner's mind, and drop-

ping the baggage becomes as habitual as tying the rank belt. And a new habit begins...not picking up the baggage when you leave class. Then a whole new set of awarenesses occur that take us beyond our classes to the world in which we live every day. We begin to see opportunities because we have in fact begun to see our options in life.

Perhaps before this point we have acquired the awareness that the process is like an onion that never gets smaller and that peels away one layer at a time, to reveal yet another layer.

This is the journey I invite you to take. The social proof is in the lives of those who started this path and who are still on it. We are not perfect souls, far from it. We are, however, all willing to recognize that our perceptions are often faulty, capable of greater levels of clarity and that each of us can learn from what you have to share with us. ☺

"It's difficult to see your opportunities, if you don't know your options."

—
Jay Abraham

Concentration

In the world of the martial arts class, concentration and focus are absolute necessities. Yet most of us come to class woefully unprepared in these areas. We don't live in a world where concentration is practiced to a high degree. If we did, then our GNP would be a lot higher as a nation and our lives would not revolve around instant gratification as much as they do.

When parents bring children to the dojo, they sometimes tell us that they would like their child to have more discipline or more concentration. It is as though there is an unspoken awareness in society that martial arts training instills discipline and builds skills of concentration. And of course, to a degree that's true. Sometimes what we do takes a lot of self-control; it's difficult, awkward, painful even, both physically and mentally. Squeezing one more throw out of your body when your arms and legs are shaking and seemingly incapable of supporting your weight let alone that of your training partner is an exercise in mental and physical willpower. It is the determination not to give in. It is the debt I owe to my training partner. It is an exercise that leads to the recognition that we can each achieve more than we thought possible, and that by developing concentration, we will develop an indomitable spirit, which will not fail us when the going gets tough.

So why do we do it? Martial arts shows us a carrot. It holds up an image in front of us of someone who is

more able and more aware than the person who is looking at the image. Those of us who stay with the program want that image. As soon as we get it, the martial arts onion peels another layer and we see another image and the journey continues.

At each level we learn deeper levels of concentration and focus. We become aware that we are in fact capable of much deeper levels of concentration than before and we begin to use the tool in all areas of our lives. This is one of the reasons that we use martial arts as a tool in helping children improve scholastic grades. We endeavor to demonstrate to our young martial artists that if they can concentrate in the dojo, they can take the same skills and apply them in the classroom and while they are doing homework. The net result is an improvement in academic grades. More importantly, the higher level of focus demands that once a higher performance plateau has been reached, the child will not normally want to go back to lower levels of performance. Performance becomes its own reward.

Let's take another view on this thing for a moment: Martial arts moves are supposedly "natural" but if you ask any beginner the moves feel anything BUT natural. It takes a good deal of concentration, just to get the body parts in the right place at the right moment. Slowly, our bodies learn the "right" way to move and the moves become natural. One of the things I learned a bunch of years ago

makes me smile...a lot. Something that is "wrong" in one martial art is natural and right in another. Having trained in both Korean and Japanese styles, I am frequently amused by the differences in what is right and wrong in the application of a particular technique. I suspect that this is why Bruce Lee moved away from the formalized rigid stances to more fluid actions. But you know, it really makes little difference to the beginner. Martial arts moves are inherently strange and different and take a lot of effort to master. Some forms may be easier to master than others, but then again different people will find aptitude for different things and have to concentrate harder on aspects of learning for which others have to expend almost no effort. It all comes out in the wash. Sooner or later every student of the martial arts is confronted with the necessity of developing concentration and focus, if he or she wishes to penetrate to the heart of the training.

When that moment arrives we allow ourselves to become totally absorbed in what we are doing and we become changed by the process. It is the act of concentration that leads to transformation. Without dedication and commitment to the act of learning, nothing will happen; we will learn nothing.

Only with concentration will we see higher levels of performance and achieve what is possible with the abilities that we each have. ☺

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.

-Nelson Mandela

Transformation

As we progress through our training in the marital arts our vision of ourselves and our vision of the world begins to change. We see things differently, reorganize our values and recognize that we are beginning to become a person who was hidden in the shadows of our previous self.

Some of the first and most obvious changes that take place are the external changes in body shape and fitness. We lose some unwanted pounds, develop muscle mass and feel fitter, stronger, lighter. We see some simple things like the number of push-ups that we can do goes up and we see an improvement in balance, coordination and for some of us, improvements in flexibility.

But in a lot of ways, this exterior transformation is merely just window dressing for the deeper changes that are taking place at a much more subtle level. At the mental level, as we continue training, we find ourselves less easily rattled by life, less prone to carry stress and more ready to shake it off. We find our moods easier to manage. The endorphin rush we get from seeing the successes of our training acts as a quiet fuel in other areas of our lives (like our jobs and our relationships), urging us to take risk with assurance of eventual success.

In my own life, one of the things that I have noticed is a deeper, more grounded patience and a sense of acceptance. My training has shown me that whatever I want to overcome in myself I can eventually master, if I focus on it, work on it and use patience.

At an even deeper level we experience "Aha" moments when a light bulb goes and we experience a paradigm shift in our awareness of the world and our place in it.

I love watching those moments and the positive ripples that they create in a person's life. Recently in our instructor's class we were talking

about how people process information and were discussing the difference between "pleasure seekers" and "pain avoiders". One of my black belts had an "Aha" moment when he discovered how his life was affected by his particular processing preference. I watched the ripples for the next few days and by the end of the week, whether or not he was aware of it, he was walking lighter and smiling more. It was like a weight had lifted. The "Aha" moments are transient things and we soon fall back into lower levels of awareness, but we never return to where we were. We have changed and will always reflect the effects of the "Aha" moments.

Transformation of life is really not about martial arts either; it can come with disciplined dedication to any form of study. It is commitment to the process that is important, not the vehicle. What is important is the fact that you embarked on the journey. What does it matter whether you have a Porsche or bicycle in your garage if you have no intention of ever leaving your house? To dedicate yourself to the process of growth and change is to ensure that it will indeed take place. The rate of change is a matter for a wholly different article

I'd like to close this part of the discussion by telling you that I truly believe that Nelson Mandela is correct, we are far more afraid of who we might be than the demons we create to hold us back. When I first read the quote, I didn't like it and yet it was like one of those insidious kinds of things that gnaws away at you until its true meaning sinks in....or maybe I'm just a bit slower than everyone else!

Ultimately it's all about **transcendence**: We transcend who we were in search of who we might be, and once there, we look around and then step once more into the unknown, smiling.



FEBRUARY						
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- ◆ Clarksville Judo Tournament, TN, February 26th, 2005
- ◆ USJA Seniors, battle of Columbus, OH, March 4-6th, 2005
- ◆ Bob Harvey's Judo Tournament, Jackson, MS, March 6th, 2005
- ◆ Gentlewind Kata clinic, Baton Rouge, LA, March 12th, 2005
- ◆ 3rd Ippon Open Judo Tournament, Peachtree City, GA, April 16th, 2005
- ◆ Melton's Judo Tournament, Jackson, MS May 20th, 2005
- ◆ Charlotte Judo Camp, N.C., June 22nd through 26th, 2005.
- ◆ USJA Junior National s, Toledo, OH, July 1-2nd, 2005
- ◆ USJI Junior Olympics, Atlanta, GA, July 23-24th, 2005
- ◆ SMAA Open Judo Tournament, September, 2005
- ◆ Melton's Judo Tournament, Jackson, MS November 18th, 2005
- ◆ USJA Junior national s, Boca Raton, FL, 2006

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