

Pathways

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CONTENTS

Empty and Fill	1
Listening	2
Coming Home	3
Commitment and Quitting	4

“The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking which created them”

—Albert Einstein

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Empty & Fill

Have you ever tried to talk to someone who would just not listen? Have you ever been the person who did not want to listen? Why is that? I sometimes think that much of it has to do with the fact that our minds are full of our preconceived notions of how things are supposed to be and we are therefore unwilling and often unable to listen to other possibilities. Sometimes we don't even want to know that they exist. Sometimes, of course, we just know that we are right and the other person therefore just has to be wrong...it's your job to set the other person straight.

Any of this make you squirm? I know it can easily be applied to me at times. One of the places I see this a lot as a university professor and a martial arts coach is when students, or even other coaches and teachers are not willing to consider that things could be done different ways. Or is it me?

The crux of the matter comes down to this: It is impossible to see other alternatives unless you are open to look. We generally see exactly the opportunities and possibilities that we want to see. Often, when our minds are closed or our emotions heavily invested in a particular issue we become blind, intolerant and inflexible. It can often take a monumental act of will to listen to another perspective, see a different path, and to embrace novel concepts and ideas. We are after all, creatures of habit.

But that's the point isn't it? If martial arts teach us anything it is to empty the mind and see the possibilities inherent in any situation rather than

force our will upon the situation. When the mind is quiet and calm it is possible to see all manner of opportunities that we could not see when we were fractious, anxious, worried, angry, depressed or opinionated.

If I have learned anything in the martial arts in thirty years or more of training, it is that I truly know very little. Sometimes I think I have learned nothing. Sometimes when I go to a camp or clinic and watch an instructor or student do something in a novel way I wonder why I was unable to see it beforehand. The issue is simply that my mind has preconceived notions of how something is “supposed” to be done and I am unable to see other opportunities until I separate myself from my history and open myself to other ways of doing things.

Einstein made the statement that problems cannot be resolved by the same mind that created them. In essence what he was telling us was that to see solutions to the dilemmas, challenges and problems we face in life, we need a higher level of consciousness or awareness to see the opportunities and solutions that are possible in any situation. In essence our problems can only be resolved by higher order thinking.

Since we are not used to higher order thinking, this is uncharted territory for most of us, most of the time. So when you find yourself enmeshed in challenges; be still, access your higher mind and be open to the possibility that there are positive solutions that you have never imagined. ☺

Listening

When mind, body and spirit are not in tune, we suffer. It is that simple. The question is always why? What is the cause of the imbalance? Is it poor diet, lack of exercise, some other health concern? Is it work, school, home, family, friends? Is it fear, worry, uncertainty, doubt? Is it stress, guilt, shame? Or is it some combination of all of these

The sad part about all of this is that not only do we feel overwhelmed, stressed out, tired and unfocused, we lose the ability to think creatively, see positive outcomes, manage our priorities effectively or achieve our goals as easily. Living becomes work...or at least it can become so unless we can re-establish the balance and flow of our daily existence.

What we need at these times is an ability to listen...to our own internal dialog and to the outside world.

Listen to your internal voice...how much time do you give to your greatest detractor...your internal critic...you know the little voice that tells you that you are not adequate or capable at every opportunity. Several years ago, when I took a personal coaching course, my coach told me to listen to the critic, thank him for his input and

tell him to be quiet...I'll get back to him...when I need to hear from him again. It can be quite liberating to tell your internal critic that you appreciate the input, but right now you have other options that do not involve limiting your choices or abilities and slowly over time, you will find that your inner critic becomes quieter and less intrusive or demoralizing.

Listen to your body. Actually, I would ask you to stop and sense your body...feel the tension in your back, shoulders, neck. Feel the stiffness in your hips. Feel your stomach and heart. How do you feel? Feel whether your arms and legs are heavy and sluggish. Where, how and why do you store your tension. If your shoulders are tight can you associate a specific cause or worry to the tightness? Can you let it go?

Listen to your spirit. Is it light or heavy? Are you burdened or are you at peace with yourself? Is the little child in you happy or sad? Are there areas of your life that you need to resolve, that hold you back, that limit your success?

Listen to your mind. Is your mind razor sharp and focused or are you diluting your mental ability with unneces-

sary worry and confusion? Are you able to plan and follow through on your action plans? Are you losing your thread in conversations? Are you only partly here, part of the time?

Listening to others is an art form. Internal listening is even harder because most of the time we don't do it. We are often so enmeshed in the process of living and doing that we forget to listen to our internal self. Internal listening is a difficult thing to master because it is so easy to delude ourselves that what we see and hear and feel is really what is...rather than what we are imagining.

I am reminded of the idea that the mind is merely experiencing our experiences and our brains are the recording devices. Everything that happens in our day to day life is filtered through the sieve of our previous experiences and interpreted accordingly. Stepping outside of that dialog and truly listening to what is going on inside can reveal great benefits and allow you to overcome obstacles in your path...many of which we place there ourselves!

Happy listening! ☺

"First there is an ending, then a beginning, with an important empty or fallow time in between. That is the order of things in nature. Leaf-fall, winter and then the green emerges again from the dry brown wood. Human affairs would flow along similar channels if we were better able to stay in the current."

— William Bridges, Transitions

Coming Home

According to a friend of mine, the Japanese verb “Kaeru” is typically translated as “to return.” Specifically, I am told that the word implies a particular kind of returning. By way of examples, we might envision a return to one’s place of birth, or a return to one’s roots. In either case there is a special connotation to the sense of returning.

There are lots of things that we can return to in life. We can return to school in the fall, we can return to the store to do more shopping, we can return to the beach for a holiday, but there are also a very few special places to which we can return. Because I was born there, I can return to England in a way that Americans cannot when they go there on holiday. Likewise there is a house in Starkville to which I can return each day that is the center of my familial world, and which is therefore unlike any other place in town.

So the question is why do I want to write about it?

There is a single place to which only you can return...and that is your true self.

We spend much of our lives trying to live our lives according to the wants and needs of other people. We don’t want to disappoint people, we want to be well thought of, we want to be seen as successful. As I have said before I constantly see students at the university who are in the middle of a degree program that they really don’t want to be studying because they are trying desperately to please someone other

than themselves. By the time we reach our mid twenties, most of us have spent a good deal of time modifying our behavior to suit the dictates of the familial structures or social groups to which we belong. Sometimes, that process leads us away from our true self.

Try this for a moment. When was the last time you spoke with someone and said something that you did not truly believe? When was the last time you denied your own truth for the sake of the situation at hand? When was the last time you compromised your integrity? It can be so easy to do that sometimes we don’t even realize we are doing it.

Going back to the martial arts analogy for a moment: We study martial arts to bring mind, body and spirit into congruence with each other and in so doing reach a level of being that is closer to our true self. All of which sounds highly nebulous. But, if you will bear with me for a minute or two, I believe that within each of us is a spiritual self that is quietly awaiting discovery. When we train in the martial arts there are moments in the training when everything flows together in a sublimely rich act of motion. The art is effortless and our mind is calm, the body is responsive to the slightest cue from our partner. In these moments we are more in tune with our true self than we are at other times. In these moments we return to self. As I recently said to a client: “It’s not about fighting, its about awareness. It’s about blending not opposition.”

So, in moments when the martial arts are effortless, we are in tune with the world around us and can respond with freedom of action. I would argue that in those moments, we have returned to a self that is unique in all the universe. No-one else can ever return to that particular self.

Moreover, I would argue that each of us can return to that home. We don’t have to do martial arts to get there either. Each of us can have that experience. Each of us can know moments when mind, body and spirit are united in a single cause...and of course the instant we become aware of it, we lose it.

Such are the moments of flow. Moments of flow are not peculiar to martial artists. Musicians, athletes of all kinds and specialists in any field can experience those moments. I think that my wife experiences moments like this when I watch her in the garden bringing life to the world around her. I know that my young son has moments like this as he discovers the world around him.

There is a deep sense of fulfillment associated with experiencing a moment of flow...no matter how brief. And having had it once...we want more of it...Until we grow up and forget that such things are possible!

I often think that living is about coming home. It is about the journey to self, which can only be made as an individual. No-one else can make that journey for you. No-one else can tell you whether you are on the right path...only you can do that. ☺

You have to have emptiness before it can be filled.

You have to exhale before you can inhale

- Tom Yeomans

Commitment and Quitting

Summers are the time of year when we do different things. Some of us are out of school. Some of us have kids out of school. Some of us take trips. Some of us simply want a break from the routine of life. All of this is as it should be. We all need times of rejuvenation and renewal. In the novel "Dune" by Frank Herbert, King Leto Atreides says to his son: "Without new experiences, something in us sleeps and seldom awakens." New experiences rejuvenate us and allow us to grow.

The problem is that sometimes we let things go that we should keep. We do it with the very best of intentions. During the summer I see a lot of students decide to "take the summer off" and we never see them again. The students who are truly committed to learning the martial arts will tell us things like: "We are taking the next three weeks off for a trip and I'll see you at the beginning of July." We almost always see those students come back.

The problem comes when we really didn't commit to the process in the first place. We say we are taking a break, but in reality we are quitting. Now we all know that quitting is something we don't want to do. We don't want to be known as a quitter, so we create elaborate mind games to assure ourselves that we are just taking a short break to renew our effort... but if we are honest with ourselves we simply do not wish to commit to the process.

I use martial arts as my example because, well, that's my business...but I see the same thing in my university career. Some students lose steam at the end of the semester and do "not so well" on their finals simply because they want to get out and they are ready for the semester to be over.

I think a lot of it comes to being committed to the process until the goal has been reached and losing fo-

cus. Perhaps we were never committed to school in the first place, or we really don't like the major we are in. It really doesn't matter what the reason happens to be.

Commitment is a difficult thing. Quitting is easy. More often than not, we quit because we lose sight of the greater goal or the benefits of staying the course. Sometimes of course we need to change paths. Sometimes we make a commitment, honor it and then find that we need to change paths and make new commitments.

In the world of the martial arts studio it is important to have a sense of community. We build that community by committing to each other, rather than the martial arts. We commit to helping our training partners on their own road to learning. We are fellow travelers on the path. When we look outward to our fellow students rather than looking inward at our own wants, we see ways in which we can help each other and the result is a synergy of purpose. Brian Tracey uses the line: "You can get anything you want if you help others get what they want." Nothing could be more true when it comes to training in martial arts.

For certain martial arts is a journey of self discovery and continuous learning, but it is also a journey of sharing. When the fun goes out of it, perhaps I am looking inward too much and not sharing as much as I should.

I made a commitment years ago to train in the martial arts for the whole of my life. I honor that commitment. The path has taken some interesting and unexpected turns along the way, but I am still training and learning. I shall continue to do so. I am committed to the process, the journey.

It takes time to develop commitment. It takes only a moment to quit. Whenever you reach that point in life for whatever reason it is always your call. ☺

JUNE						
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MAY						
S	M	T	W	T	F	S
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29	30	31				

- ◆ Mel ton's Judo Tournament, Jackson, MS May 21st, 2005
- ◆ SMAA/PAF break a Thon, may 21st, 2005.
- ◆ Texoma Judo Camp, Wichita Falls, TX, June 6th-10th, 2005
- ◆ Charlotte Judo Camp, N.C., June 15th through 18th, 2005.
- ◆ USJA Junior National s, Toledo, OH, July 1-2nd, 2005
- ◆ Akayama Summer Camp, Birmingham, AL, July 16 & 17th, 2005
- ◆ USJI Junior Olympics, Atlanta, GA, July 23-24th, 2005
- ◆ SMAA Open Judo Tournament, September, 2005
- ◆ Mel ton's Judo Tournament, Jackson, MS November 18th, 2005
- ◆ USJA Junior national s, Boca Raton, FL, 2006
- ◆ USJA Junior National s, Indianapolis, IN, 2007

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