

Pathways

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*Wisdom is to the mind, what
health is to the body
-- La Rochefoucauld*

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Strain Hardening

I suspect that this article will not be to the liking of some and be misunderstood by others, but it has been coming for a while and needs to be said.

One of the ways in which humans grow, is through continual exposure to stressful events. Now that's not to say we are supposed to seek out stressful events to grow, it is merely to say that we learn through our mistakes and succeed because of our failures. Some of us repeat the same mistakes over and over because we do not wish to learn and some of us repeat the same mistakes because we are blind to the lessons that we should be learning. It is easy for me to look at my life and see instances of both.

The point to the foregoing is simple: We improve ourselves as we learn. We get physically, mentally and emotionally more resilient and capable through the lesson learned.

All of which is about setting the stage for the main thrust of the article.

One of the great sadnesses of being a martial arts instructor is the loss of people who get to a certain point and quit because it gets too hard. I can accept any number of reasons for walking away from training, after all, lives and needs change, but I have a tough time with students who tell me that it's too hard. The answer always arouses a deep sense of failure in my heart.

Now let's look at why.

It is probably fair to say that anything that we learn starts out easy, then gets difficult and challenging and then as we master the material, it gets easy again. For some of us, in some areas of our lives, the material never gets

easy and we struggle because we have reached the upper limit of our ability. In my case calculus and differential equations did it for me. They never got easy, I constantly struggled, but looking back, I can see I was just too immature see the concepts.

I think that part of our societal culture is that we have grown accustomed to wanting stuff to be easy all the way through and we have lost sight of the positive effects of being stretched and challenged to perform. Sometimes those challenges can take us to the very edges of our abilities, be they physical, emotional or academic. The thing of it is though, after we pass the threshold, we find ourselves to be stronger, more able and more resilient than we were before. We find ourselves prepared for the next stage of learning and growing.

One of the things about martial arts is that the more we "do the techniques" and practice the skills, the tougher our bodies and minds become. The process is almost insidious...we don't see it happening, until we look back several ranks later and realize how far we have come.

Things that used to 'hurt' are no longer noticed. By taking break falls over and over the body gets tougher and the mind more confident. The same is true of sparring. The bottom line is simple: The more we face our weaknesses, the sooner we will overcome them and be more useful both to ourselves and others.

And this, ladies and gentlemen, is why we stay the course: To become better, more capable and more confident than our prior selves.☺

Strength and Weakness

Following on from the last article we come to a discussion of strength and weakness.

We are told by motivational gurus and corporate trainers to go to our strengths and to cover our weaknesses with others who can do the things that we do not do so well. There is great merit in this advice.

If I am growing a business, I need to surround myself with people who are capable in areas where I am weak. If I can do this, then the business will have the synergy of strength that derives from the sum of our skills. As a result, the business will be less controlled by my strategic and tactical weaknesses as the founding entrepreneur.

Now let's look at 'me' as a marketable product: 'Me Inc'. What controls my ultimate success is my weakness, not my strength. Let's take a hypothetical example: Let's say I have a brilliant, creative mind capable of penetrating to the heart of a problem and finding workable solutions, but lack the ability to communicate my ideas to people in any other way than one that annoys the people around me and makes them feel like they are stupid. It's not my brilliance that controls my success, it's my ability to effectively communicate that limits my progress. In this scenario, it is highly likely that either I learn to communicate or I will pay a high price in the market place of my career.

As 'Me Inc', I need to face my weaknesses so that I am better able to leverage my strengths. It's kind of like driving a sports car on flat tires...until you fix the tires the car will never drive to its potential.

One of the hardest lessons in the martial arts is to go to where you are weak and train there. We like to look good, feel confident, and rely on our strengths. It takes great courage to put aside the skills we have acquired and train from a posi-

tion of apparent weakness. Part of it is showing up to class either as a teacher or a student with an empty cup. Not an easy thing to do, especially if you are the supposed teacher.

There are some things in the martial arts that I do phenomenally well...as well there should be...I've been training for more than forty years. Conversely, there are some things that I do not do well at all. The trap becomes teaching from my strengths rather than teaching from the full breadth of the curriculum for which I am responsible. If I teach from my strengths, then the students who come to me for lessons will be distorted martial artists with only a partial grasp of what is possible for them.

The same is true if I am the supposed student. There are some classes that I like better than others, because they fit better with my body type, or my interests, or my abilities. Let's say I like doing the throwing classes because I'm not so flexible and the striking classes challenge my balance. Slowly I start emphasizing one aspect of my training and slowly over time, I distort my own view of the martial arts.

It's like only eating the bits of a meal that you like, and leaving the rest. You are not getting a balanced diet. It is variety of diet that helps to keep the human machine purring along at high levels of efficiency.

Or, if you prefer, there is the age old adage that if the only tool you have is a hammer, then everything begins to look like a nail.

Having said all of that, there is a natural tendency to move towards our proclivities and interests...we are after all each idiosyncratic individuals and that is what makes humans such amazingly interesting creatures.

What I am concerned about in this article is when we start to move so far towards our strengths that they begin to blind us.

Eventually, we can develop such a reliance upon our areas of strength that we leave ourselves weak and vulnerable.

The final arbiter of the process of seeing strengths and weaknesses for what they are is internal integrity and honesty. What I am talking about here is a quiet, internal sort of self-dialog that softly reminds each of us that it is ego who is putting strength out there to be seen, it is ego who hides our weaknesses from our own sight. There is also the prompting of the higher self who reminds us of our potential, of the things that we do not yet know and the limitless lessons that the universe has for us to learn, if we are only willing.

It takes courage to listen to that inner dialog and not to squelch it into silence. Perhaps this is the beginning of true humility. No-one else need ever know about the internal dialog between ego and your higher self, but I will guarantee you this is a path to self-knowledge.

When we train in the martial arts we lay ourselves open to the possibility of real growth with every class, and just as easily we leave ourselves open to the pretensions of ego. Of course, most of the time, we hover somewhere in the middle. So I have a challenge for you whether you do martial arts or not:

Take an inventory of your skill set.

What are your strengths?

What are your known weaknesses?

What weaknesses are hidden by your strengths?

What weaknesses do you not want to see, but you know are there?

What are you going to do about your inventory?

Where is your primary path for personal growth?

What is your hardest, least favorite task, given what you have just learned about yourself?

Are you willing to do something about it? What? ☺

There is no wisdom, save in truth. Truth is everlasting, but our ideas about truth are changeable. Only a little of the first fruits of wisdom, only a few fragments of the boundless heights, breadths and depths of truth have I been able to gather.

Martin Luther

Self-Defense...maybe

Supposedly, one of the reasons that some of us learn martial arts is for self-defense.

Let's look at that for a moment. For some of us it is true, we need the combat skills for the real world because of our jobs or because of some traumatic event that has occurred. For most of us though, life is a series of safe days without physical hostility or confrontation. So what's the point?

I'll tell you. The point to learning self-defense skills in a world where they should not be needed, relates to the concept of intent.

When I learn a throw or a strike I need to learn it with intent. Simply going through the motions doesn't do me any good. It is only when I dig into the meaning of the action that I truly begin to train with intent. Training with intent doesn't mean that I intend to hurt my training partner...far from it. Training with intent means training with a full awareness of what we are about in the moment.

Training with intent is about being fully present in each moment of the process. There is no room for anything beyond our concentration, no consideration of where we are going to go for dinner after class, or the chemistry test we have tomorrow.

Training with intent helps us to become more efficient at what we do. Actions become more precise, accurate, measured, appropriate, more fluid and more elegant.

Training with intent is about learning to move with utter commitment to what it is we are about, regardless of whether it is

doing the dishes, or fighting for our lives.

There will be times in our lives when events occur that focus our full attention like a razor to the moment at hand. The moment (whatever it is) literally demands (compels) our attention. There is simply no choice, there is only total commitment, total attention on the moment. In those moments we either flow or freeze, depending upon our experiences of life.

Enter: Martial arts training. When we have trained with intent, we have taught ourselves to flow and not freeze when faced with a simulated attack. That's not to say that we will not freeze, it is simply to say that it is less likely.

One of the things we tell our students is that you become what you practice. Building a training habit is easy...for good or bad. Changing one of those habits, once ingrained can be like one of the Ordeals of Hercules.

So it come to this then: If you train with intent and focus your attention in the moment, then you develop valuable habits that will serve you when the need arises. If you train in a lackluster sort of way, you will still acquire habitual responses, but they will not be the ones that you need in times of crisis.

When I use the word 'crisis', here I do not simply mean physical confrontation in the sense of a self-defense event, so much as any personal crisis either emotional, physical or both.

The underlying statement here is that training in the moment has

transference to many other areas of our lives. Training in the moment allows us to see when we are about to lose our self-composure and become angry at someone. Training in the moment leaves us room to choose our responses because of time dilation...we do not have to respond with the first words or actions that come to mind (or not). We have 'time' to choose the best response...which might be walking away, rather than saying something that we might regret later.

The transference effect of training with intent and moving in the moment then, is about taking the lessons that we learn in the dojo and working on the ability to apply them in the real world.

Many of us will go through our entire lives and never face a violent attack, but this does not change the need to train for self-defense. Self-defense moments occur on the highway while we are driving, in the corporate boardroom, the home or any other of the place where we interact on a daily basis. Training with intent teaches us to move with greater purpose and assurance through our lives.

Living in the moment is possibly one of the hardest (and paradoxically easiest) things you will ever learn to do....what makes me laugh so often is that in those moments when you catch yourself living in the moment and moving with intent...you just lost it and have to start again!

Time to go back to class....

☺

So what?

So what have I been saying in this newsletter? In it's essence, I think that I have really been saying only one thing: Focus and see self as it truly is in each moment of existence.

When we live in the moment and see ourselves as we are, we strip away the delusions with which we so often protect our egos.

Whether we 'like' what we see in those moments is irrelevant...they are moments for personal growth. If we are living from the promptings of our higher self, then living in the moment is an encouragement to continue in the same vein. If we see ourselves living from the promptings of ego, then we have an opportunity to learn and grow. I find this a constant struggle. It is not an easy path for me...I get in my own way waaaaay too often.

Don't mistake me here, I'm not ego-bashing, I'm merely emphasising that we get so easily snared by our egoic nature that it is all too easy to stifle the promptings of a higher self. I think that we all know when the higher self guides our actions...we are empathic, compassionate, altruistic, understanding, gracious, caring. Not that the ego cannot do these things also, but when ego acts,

there is also the additional subtext of "what's in it for me?" When the higher self acts the subtext is no longer there and the action occurs for its own sake, rather than my desires of the moment.

Ultimately, when I look at our martial arts school, I see wonderful people, who on the face of it say they are training for all manner of reasons: personal fitness, self-defense, self-confidence, a stress reliever, a social gathering place with like-minded souls...but in reality are all moving towards the same goal along different paths. Martial arts are a path to self-discovery. Sometimes what we see along the way is not to our liking and we either persevere or we walk away. Sometimes what we see along the way inspires us and those around us are inspired by us.

It is a thing of synergy to me that in each class on almost every class day there is someone who is having an inspring moment and we are all made better by the presence of that moment. The trick is being open to see these moments as they occur.

There is the wonderful line that says that 90% of success is simply showing up.

It is so true, but it doesn't mean what we read. What it really means

is: BE THERE! Really be there....in the moment and be infused by the experience of which you are an indispensable part. Too often we show up, but we are not really there for the experiences of our lives and we miss out. We let opportunities slip. We become blind to possibilities and we begin to think that what we see is all there is.

I was asked recently why I am still doing [Judo] and what rank means to me. Rank means nothing to me at this point because in my heart, even though I have supposedly learned so much, I know that I have learned so little of what is there to learn...I am still blind and martial arts is one of my chosen vehicles for illumination. What are your vehicles? ☺

SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

- ◆ **AKAYAMA FALL CLINIC. STARKVILLE, MS. NOVEMBER 21ST WEEKEND, 2009.**

Know thyself? If I knew myself, I'd run away

Johann Goethe

Every man who expresses an honest thought is a soldier in the army of intellectual freedom

Robert Ingersoll

SEEING
and
BEING



Collected Poems By
CHRIS DEWEY

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