

Pathways

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*We do not experience
the world fully, unless we
are willing to give every-
thing away*

Pema Chodron

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Alone and Lonely

Life is about change. There is simply no avoiding it. The mere passage of time and the aging of a body is sufficient evidence of that!

Sometimes in life we find ourselves alone. And sometimes in life we are lonely. To be one is not the to be the other. I have been alone in nature for days and not felt lonely. I have been in a crowded room and felt totally lonely.

Alone is a matter of circumstance and sometimes a matter of choice. To be lonely is a matter of emotional response and therefore, 'lonely' is largely a matter of choice.

In the two examples I gave I could choose to feel lonely in the woods, because there was no-one there to share it with me. In the crowded room, I could choose to integrate myself into the group and seek connection, rather than feel lonely. In both cases, choices are made that affect my condition of loneliness.

All of which brings up a really neat point that my son and I discussed this morning. Loneliness is often a response to some sort of fear. It could be the fear of rejection, the fear of isolation, the fear of non-belonging, the fear of not feeling worthy, the fear of not being needed or wanted, loved, appreciated, welcomed....and the list goes on. I'm sure you can fill in the words just as easily as can I.

One thing I have learned in life is that when I do feel lonely, it is a palpable choice to look at that loneliness and ask myself "Why?" As soon as I ask the question of myself, I almost always get back a response that is fear-related.

At that point, things get easier. Once you know what the fear is, you can face it...or not. That's your choice.

For me, the fear of being rejected, the fear of being unworthy and the fear of not being needed are my biggest challenges. They hurt.

Odd thing is though, as soon as I look at the fear for whatever it happens to be within the present manifestation of loneliness, it tends to evaporate. The fear itself is a coward that cannot stand the cold light of reason. For sure, there have been times in my life when I have been rejected, and not needed..but these times do not define who I am as a person. As for being worthy...well, that's my choice. I either see myself as having something of value to offer the world, or I do not. But don't confuse unworthy with humble, they are not the same thing at all. 'Humble' is accepting, 'unworthy' is negating...huge difference.

So it comes to this: I so very rarely feel lonely in nature because I feel so completely connected to what I am doing there, whether it is photography, poetry, or just sitting. I belong in the woods, it is a home to me, it is an extension of me. I feel lonely in crowded rooms because I choose to isolate myself and deny the bond of connection that exists between myself and the other people present. As soon as that bond of connection is denied, fear emerges to fill the gap and it all spirals down. As soon as the fear is released, connection occurs and loneliness evaporates.

Are you ever lonely? If you are, look for the fear and face it. I think that you'll be pleased with the outcome. ☺

Outside or Inside the Box

When I was thirty I wrote a poem (in Paradox of Being) called "Tin Box." It elicited a "hmmm" from my father, which was close to a compliment, so I took it as such.

So what is this box to which we habitually refer? We are told to think outside of it, but just how exactly do I do that? Inside the box are all your normal, habituated feelings, thoughts, actions, emotions, neuroses, foibles...and such...they define you and provide the edges to your own personal box. In some ways the limits of your character define the edges of your personal box. In other ways, the expectations of others about who and what you are a further limit and define your lebensraum (living space).

So if that's the case, how the heck do I live outside it, or for that matter how can I think outside it?

Well, obviously you can't. All you can really do is enlarge the size of the box to include a broader range of experiences, feelings, actions, activities and options. The sides of the box really don't go away, they simply get placed further out. If we are willing to do so, we can eventually place them so far out, that they fade into parallax and are no longer visible to us. In that case, we have broadened our horizons so far that we are willing to truly embrace the novel, the unknown, the untested.

Consequently, inside the box it's warm and cozy and comfortable and expected. Outside the box, it's a little more daunting, scary and uncertain.

Inside the box, there is little change, outside the box there is nothing but change. Inside the box are self-imposed limitations that become the socially accepted norms for who I am. Outside the box is the opportunity to reach my potential, to find those parts of myself that I have never imagined existed.

Inside the box and outside the box is fear. That's O.K. Put it aside and make a decision. Who do you want to be?

When I look at my world there are socially accepted versions of who I am: For thirty-some years I have been defined by my role as a university-level academic. I

have also been defined by my role as a martial artist. In each case, there are feelings, experiences, habits, actions and activities, fears, hopes and dreams that in total define the edges of my little box.

Given the nature of my own particular box and its place in the society of humanity in which I move, there is a socially expected norm for 'Chris Dewey' that further defines the edges of the box *from the outside* and which also in its own way help to keep me in the box. At a smaller level, there are socially expected norms within my family and within the community of my co-workers. For instance, as a martial artist it is a socially accepted norm that I can throw people around and twist their arms and legs till they submit. If I did these things to my co-workers in the university setting, I'm not thinking that the results would be so satisfying for all concerned!

The point to all the foregoing was that you do not define the edges of your box alone...society helps you along the way.

So if I can't really think outside of the box, how then do I at least expand my options and push the boundaries of the box outward?

There are some simple things you can do at a habitual and physical level. Get in and out of bed in different ways, clean your teeth in different ways, choose different clothes, drive/walk/bike to work along a different route, read a book you would not normally choose. Get the idea? This much is easy, well, at least on the face of it.

Last year, I set myself the seemingly simple task of cleaning my teeth in a different way each day for a month...I failed miserably by the end of the second week. I tried washing my face before cleaning my teeth, I tried the other hand holding the toothbrush, I tried starting with a different set of teeth, I tried cleaning my teeth sitting on the edge of the bath, I tried cleaning my teeth in lots of different positions and ways, but ultimately the elastic band bounced back to its original shape and I clean my teeth the same old way. The box edge was pretty rigid with regard to teeth-cleaning.

Well, O.K., maybe that's not such a big deal.

The problem is though, that if I adopt that attitude in how I respond when someone makes me angry (for instance), then I will never grow or learn. Learning to think outside of the box is learning to examine how you have ritualized your responses to human interactions.

It is not for me to tell you how to live outside of the box, it is not for me to tell you to live outside of the box, that is all for you to decide.

The real issue is how willing we are to grow and to embrace formerly unexplored choices. The brain is a tool that is wired according to the choices we habitually make. The brain simply plays out the same responses each and every time we face the same stimulus, until we choose to rewrite it and seek novel choices. Obviously, there are times when the same response is a good choice, but just as obviously, if we want to grow then there are times when the same response is the worst possible choice we could make.

One of the things that I tell my students at university, is that they should expect to be changed by going to university, if you are not challenged to rethink how you see the world and your mind is not altered by the experience of acquiring a university-level education, then something is missing from the process.

Having said that, a university education is just a fractal of life. If we are not changed by our experiences, wherever we live and whatever we do, then we are not growing or learning.

So in closing, my perspective is that embracing opportunity broadens the mind, expands the heart and brings understanding.

The more experiences I can challenge and the more novel ways in which I can experience the world, the more likely I am to appreciate those people around me...and that, ladies and gentlemen can surely only lead to a great level of tolerance, acceptance and love. Or at least, that's my perspective from inside my own, quirky little box! ☺

Eufixides

When I was a kid in school, we used to have a joke which went something like this: "Euripides, you buy me a new pair" Other versions of the same thing went along the lines of Euripides, Eumenides or Euripides, Eufixides.

O.K. so it was silly, but it makes a point. And I'll get to it in a moment.

Let me start by saying something I've said quite often in these newsletters, namely, that we are habitual creatures and doing the wrong thing can feel really good, if it has become a habit. If you learn how to do a break fall, or a throw, a punch, a block, a kick...anything, and you develop poor biomechanical skills, then eventually it will feel good to you. Your body will adjust to the action and accept it as normal.

In neuroplasticity there are two rules that pertain to learning:

1. Neurons that fire together wire together; and its inverse corollary...
2. Neurons that wire together fire together.

What that means, is that once you habituate anything from an emotional response to a biomechanical skill, it is much harder to change it than to keep doing the same old, same old.

So what does this have to do with Euripides? Nothing. But it does have something to do with Eufixides.

In order for you to fix anything, you must be aware of the need to fix

something. So let's say we're in class and I show you something that needs to be adjusted in the way you place your feet during a throw. I may be showing you a key component, that once fixed, will create trickle down effects that will affect several other body actions that relate to the execution of the same action. My role as a coach is to find the key action from which all other actions stem and to help you find ways to correct it...yourself. If I can illuminate the key action, you can make a lot of changes in one go. If I fix all the other things without fixing the key action, then you will not discover for yourself the biomechanical changes that will lead to rapid progress...and the possibility of "Aha!" moments.

So from the perspective of Greek philosophers, if Eufixides, your technique will improve in a lot of areas. And, if Eumenides, then you'll be able to use the skill more effectively in the correct environment.

So what does this have to do with neuroplasticity?

Quite a lot actually.

Every time you cut a new set of neural pathways to create an action you will be recruiting all manner of subsidiary systems that involve balance, vision, coordination, emotional state, cognitive awareness and so on. Every time you do something without being aware of the things that need attention you are increasing the wiring that re-

inforces those actions. All of which makes the action more deeply habituated and, therefore, comfortable.

In order to change anything, you have to become aware that something needs changing.

The first step in change is, therefore, always awareness. First we must see ourselves as we are, then we can begin to consider the possibility of change. If we are too comfortable with who we are, change becomes much less likely.

All of which takes me back to the last article. When I am forced to think outside of my traditional box, I will almost inevitably find that some of my 'tried and true' responses are just not adequate for the situation at hand. I have to come up with some new ways of doing things.

All of which leads us to the statement that "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." I would be inclined to argue that we should assume that it is in fact broken and needs fixing. To assume otherwise is to risk becoming comfortable and therefore less likely to seek change.

There is not a single thing that I do in the martial arts that cannot stand to be improved in some way. There is always room for me to improve my technical ability. If I allow myself to become complacent about what I do, I will stagnate and cease to grow. I find that personally unacceptable.

It applies to everything in life. ☺

"To the degree that we look clearly and compassionately at ourselves, we feel confident and fearless about looking into someone else's eyes."

Pema Chodron

Confidence

I have wondered about this one for a long time. What builds confidence? The obvious answer of course, is the repetition of a skill. Experience builds confidence.

Do you remember what it was like the first time you got behind the wheel of a car and learned to drive? How about learning a foreign language? We get confident to the degree that we have practiced a skill in its environment of use.

I can feel confident about my martial arts in some environments, but not others because I have practiced my skills in some environments and not others.

Confidence is an awareness of the limitation of skill, arrogance is a lack of that awareness. The space between confidence and arrogance is large enough to drive an ego through it.

All of which brings us to self-confidence. What is self-confidence anyway? A belief in self? Sure, why not?

Could it be that self-confidence is an awareness of our skills and their limitations? Could it be that self-confidence comes from being honest with yourself? Now that's closer to a truth.

Looking at yourself with clarity can be very revealing. The trick is, of course, recognizing when you ARE being honest with yourself and when you are deluding yourself. To the extent that we are all dealing with personal limitations that we have built during our lives, it is difficult to be truly honest with yourself...but that's the point to the previous two articles. The more you practice looking at yourself from the outside, and practice honesty, the more your brain adapts to the expectation that you will, in fact, prosper from honest

self-evaluation.

All of which brings up another personal demon...the desire to be so brutally honest with yourself that you create totally unreal expectations, and beat yourself up. It's easy enough to do, especially if you subscribe to the notion of being a perfectionist...talk about an unreal expectation! How can you ever measure up? Then of course, if you are 'honest' with yourself you can spend untold amounts of effort showing yourself how imperfect you are! Not what I would recommend as a path to self-approval and self-confidence. Self-confidence comes from being kind to yourself, and from seeing yourself as a potential rather than a product. Think of a glass of water on a table...it has potential energy and if it is knocked off the table that energy becomes kinetic. The energy of growth is within each of us, the potential for growth is present...it is merely a question of unleashing that potential. (Knock the glass off the table).

So here we go then: Be honest and loving in your view of yourself. See yourself as a work in progress. You are exactly where you need to be to learn the lessons that life is presenting you. All you have to do is to show up with an open heart and an empty cup. When we are honest with ourselves and honest in the moment, change becomes possible. It is like seeing a truth that already lies within you, rather than being true to something you think you should do. There's a world of difference.

When I was a young martial artist, one of my instructors in Canada gave me the burden of achieving more than he had done in terms of rank...well that's not entirely fair. My instructor told me that it should

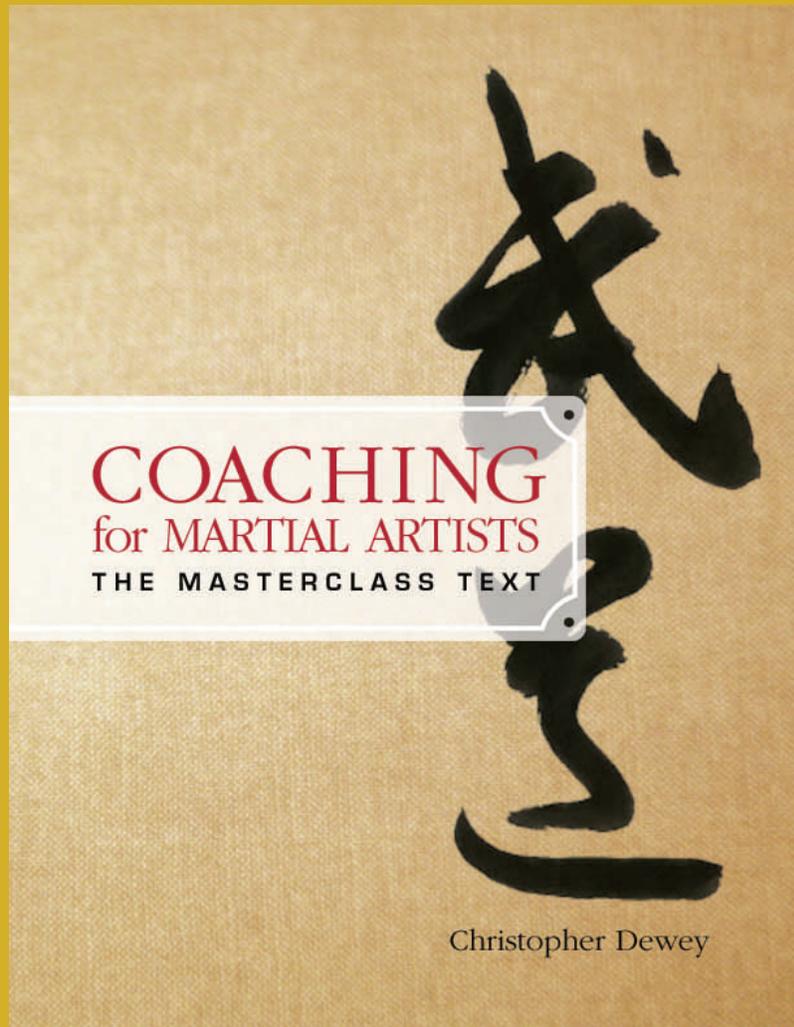
be my goal to achieve more than my instructors. I never believed that such a thing was possible. As I look back over forty years of training, I can see that I have acquired more rank in more styles than I ever dreamed possible...except that that is clearly not true...I did dare to reach for the goal and as such, I achieved more than I set out to achieve...the glass ceiling of my ability never existed...I just kept training and the ranks came.

If you had asked me at any point along the way whether I would have achieved the ranks I have acquired, I would probably have said no...probably because during the process I did not believe in the end result, because I was blind to my own potential and lacked the self-confidence to accept the possibility.

On the other hand, I kept training and I trusted the process. I kept learning and kept growing...and still do...so it's never about the destination is it? It's about the journey.

It's about how you show up in each moment of the journey and what you are willing to find within yourself and others along the way.

If I have learned anything, it is that there are untapped potentials within each of us, and when we are truly honest, we have barely scratched the surface of what is possible...and that is truly inspiring...I have no idea of what lies ahead for me. I have huge amounts of excitement about what I might discover...and from the perspective of honest synergy...the more I discover about myself, the more I bring to each moment to share with those who show up in the same space with me. All of which will increase self-belief.



Learn how to coach martial arts (or anything else for that matter).....the book is not just about the title! The principles stay the same, regardless of what subject you coach, teach, or mentor).

For information about classes, books and seminars contact us at 323 5522 or smaa@starkvillemartialarts.com