

Pathways

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Genius is eternal patience

Michaelangelo

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Hidden Meanings

I was at a T'ai Chi seminar recently, during which I made the comment that no matter what you think you know, sooner or later, experience will show a new truth.

Truth is not an absolute, truth varies over time, just ask a Flat Earth Geographer!

I don't want to get into a discussion about the nature of truth, but I do want to discuss why we go back to basics and start again, no matter how far we travel down the road of learning.

In the martial arts, we learn some basic actions that become the foundation of our art and at some point we think that we are pretty darned good at them, so we put them aside for the more flamboyant actions.

What we sometimes forget, is that in the simplest of actions are deeper meanings that we can so easily miss the first few thousand times around. As instructors, we tout the notion of going back to basics and doing the repetitions, but I also think that as instructors we sometimes forget to look at what those repetitions are teaching us.

I am sometimes surprised at myself, even after all these years of training, when I can watch beginners do a move and they show me something I'd never seen before. Sometimes a student will ask me a question that reveals a gap in my knowledge of even the simplest of moves in my art, so I go back to being a beginner and study the thing anew....again.

I believe that this is where humility enters our hearts and allows us to become the beginner again. So, one of the hidden meanings of training is not

to think that we have seen it all, no matter what we have seen. Such is the path to arrogance.

Now let's take this one stage further, let's take the basic actions of our arts into the world with us, or better yet, let's bring what we can learn of nature and bring the simple things of nature to our actions in the martial arts. It is for these reasons perhaps that the martial arts are full of metaphors of nature and why we talk about flowing like water and such. Sometimes then, our pragmatic, reason-based logical minds get in our way, and we obscure the lessons that our actions in the martial arts are attempting to reveal to us.

I would like to use all of this to challenge you to do something.

If you are in the martial arts, adopt a technique for six months and practice it daily in the morning and in the evening. Keep a journal of your experiences every day. Be honest with yourself, even on the days when you really don't want to do the repetitions.

I will submit to you that if you pay full attention and allow the action to teach you; you will learn more about that particular technique than you ever dreamed possible. I will also suggest that you will learn something about yourself and something that will apply to your life outside of the martial arts.

There is only one pre-requisite: A willingness to start each practice as an empty cup.

Happy training.

Oh yes, I almost forgot...when you are done....

Go back and start again.

Flow

There is a whole area of study involving the psychology of performance that deals with a thing we call "the flow experience." I was discussing with a friend recently, the nature of flow experiences and what they mean in our lives.

Flow includes those moments when time seems to stand still, that action is effortless and that our movement becomes a thing of grace and beauty. During a moment of flow there is more than artistry in the hand, or the instrument being played, or the picture being painted or the dance being danced. In moments of flow you merge with the action until you no longer see 'self' doing 'something'. Flow can occur in any action, and at any time, if we allow it.

If that's all a tad too esoteric for you, I'm sorry, but I have no other words to express moments of flow. If you have ever experienced flow then what I have said will make some sense to you.

I made the comment in my conversation that flow seems to occur for me most when my heart is truly open to the universe....1) in the silence of the deep, clear starlit night, 2) by the ocean or in the mountains, 3) when I have been completely, fully in love and totally free, 4) on days going from class to class when there was nothing but the synergy of learning and I was not the teacher, I was merely the conduit, 5) moments of fluid experience in the martial arts when there was not me, but simply being the observer watching some-

one who looked like me being the martial artist 6) moments when I created words or pictures, but it was not me... I was simply the channel for creation to occur.

All of which, led me to think about why we don't experience flow more often and what it is that gets in the way of flow and prevents us from experiencing flow.

I think that a good part of the problem is that we are so busy living, that we forget that we are energy beings and vibrate with energy at all times.

When we are congruent in our thoughts, our actions and our sense of being in the world, we open ourselves to the possibility of experiencing flow. Flow isn't some magical thing. It is not something that occurs only in certain types of settings; any activity can be experienced in a condition of flow if we allow it.

More often than not then, the problem is that we get in our own way. We try too hard, we dissipate our energies, and we act by doing rather than being.

For sure, if you practice something enough, then eventually flow can result from the practice-based performance, but that doesn't explain why we experience flow in things we never practice, or why novices in a field of performance can experience unexpected moments of flow, whereas others, who have been performing for decades may never experience flow, despite all the hours of practice.

If you listen to classical music you

can hear it in the music. There are certain performances that reach into you, connect with you and draw out something deep and resonant, whereas other performances of the same music can leave you cold.

I think that flow comes from moments of heightened awareness, moments in which we are fully mindful, we are fully, totally present at all levels of our being.

Sometimes those moments can take us by surprise, they can stop us in our tracks, take our breath away, move us to tears and leaves us feeling awed and perhaps just a little lost.

But, if there's one thing you cannot do, it is to plan a moment of flow. For sure, if you practice mindful action on a regular basis, then moments of flow become more likely.

Once you know what moments of flow feel like, you want more of them. But that's the trap isn't it? You simply can't conjure up a flow experience to suit your needs of the moment.

I see moments of flow as resonant moments of harmony. If you will permit me to get poetic for a moment, flow moments are moments when the universe sings through us. It really doesn't matter whether you are planting potatoes or playing Rachmaninov, flow becomes possible when we get out of our own way, and allow the action to fully express itself, without demanding that we place our own stamp of 'doing' upon it. ☺

"Something will have gone out of us as a people if we ever let the remaining wilderness be destroyed . . . We need wilderness preserved . . . because it was the challenge against which our character as a people was formed."

Wallace Stegner, *Wilderness and the Geography of Hope*

A word about rank

Every once in a while I find it necessary to write about rank. Living in the West we are admonished to set goals and achieve them. We create benchmarks of performance and we supposedly fail if we fall short. We want the prize, the trophy, the rank. We sometimes forget the process.

In martial arts (in the West), we see rank as being important, whereas it is merely an indicator of training. In 'traditional' systems there are frequently just white belts and black belts. When Gracie ju jitsu came to the U.S. there were no belt ranks. Likewise, when Krav Maga was introduced to the U.S., there were no ranks at all, just a series of syllabus-based self-defense skills.

So often rank gets in the way of progress. I see it all levels from white belts to the highest black belts, I see people who get bent out of shape because they feel that they have been passed over for rank at one time or another. What's the big deal?

I consider myself fortunate because it took me thirteen years to make my first black belt. I learned early on that I wasn't training to get another rank, or to compare myself to others who ranked ahead of me...I was training...period. The belt was, and is, irrelevant.

Unfortunately this is a difficult pill for us to swallow in the West. We are trained from kindergarten onwards to get good grades and that only A's have value. We are also taught to compare ourselves to those around us instead of looking inward to compare where we are to where we were and where we want to be.

So let's get back to the idea of martial arts rank. What is it?

Martial arts rank is given for any number of reasons. I have seen schools where you make your investment and payments and at pre-determined time in the future you get

your black belt. I have seen other schools where the process of rank is entirely capricious, dependant upon whether the instructor likes you or not. I'm not saying that we have it right, but this is how we do it....

Firstly, there is the physical and technical ability....But not all people are created physically able and to measure them all against an immovable bar is necessarily guaranteed to favour the talented, at the expense of those not so physically able.

Allied to that, there is the criterion of effort. I personally admire people who overcome their fears, develop courage in training and who show persistence. I have several black belts who, over the years, could have quit any number of times along the way, but who stayed the course and reaped the inevitable personal rewards. The black belt is simply an external token of something much more enduring. The black belt is the silent testament to the internal battles and victories. Sometimes those battles were on the mat, in class, overcoming fear; sometimes they were off the mat, outside of class using the lessons of the martial arts for personal growth. Perhaps it is an 'eye the needle' thing. I sometimes wonder if it actually harder for students for whom martial arts are easy, because they don't know the long nights of doubt or the cold sweaty palms of fear.

Secondly, there is time in grade and time on the mat. A lot of people can have time in grade, but not have the time on the mat. It's the old "I've been a yellow belt for six month and xxx just got ranked....why not me?" Normally the answer is that you may well have time in grade but you have not been to class more than a couple of times in each month. There is no substitute for being there.

Thirdly, there is the more nebulous

criterion of support, and certainly this applies more, the higher up the ranks you go. People who are out there supporting their colleagues in training, supporting the dojo or supporting the organizations to which we belong are apt to get more opportunities for training and, as a result get exposure to groups outside of their regular training partners, learn more things at a faster rate and get to move ahead.

In Judo and Karate for instance, it has long been an international tradition that competitors move ahead of non-competitors simply because the competitors have placed themselves in the crucible of learning and been through the fires of combat....they know what techniques work and what techniques do not work. More than that, competitors have applied strategic and tactical knowledge, whereas non-competitors have theoretical knowledge. There is a world of difference. In, Ju Jitsu however, competition is not particularly viable because of the potential for serious injury.

The point to all of this is that whoever you are, whatever you bring to your training, it is precisely that: YOUR training. No-one else can walk the road for you. It is uniquely and completely yours. When you train never lose sight of this fact. Don't compare yourself to others who may have a seemingly easier time of it than you, they too have unseen battles. Don't look at time as a measuring stick. Don't look at the techniques as a measuring stick.

Keep your heart in one place and one place only: The process.

Where are you in YOUR process. How much have YOU grown. Where is the path taking YOU.

It all comes down to one of Shakespeare's lesser known quotes: "To thine own self be true. Rank will take care of itself." ☺

Trying Too Hard

If I have learned something from my life as a martial artist and as a university professor, it is that it is possible to try too hard.

We see this in the martial arts a lot...especially at the beginning stages of the learning curve .

When we begin new things, or get involved with new people we often have too many things on our minds, we want to make a favorable impression, we want to get it right, we want to learn, we want to help...and quite often, we get in our own way.

It is sometimes difficult to accept where we are in the process of things: At the beginning.

It is even harder to simply *be* at the beginning and be content to be there.

We often seem to want to be further along. We don't want to do the basics, we want to do the advanced stuff.

In reality though, no matter where we are on the journey, we are always at the beginning of things, even after we've been doing them for years...we are *always* at a beginning. When we are accomplished at doing something we can get wrapped up with our own sense of what we think we have accomplished, we want to impress people, with our skill we want to look good, we don't want to be seen to make mistakes. Again, we try too hard and dissipate our minds and bodies in our efforts.

In the world of the martial artist, this can translate into trying too hard in training.

When we try too hard, we get tense and lose the ability to flow. When we try too hard, muscles that should be relaxed and uninvolved get recruited into the action and cause us to waste energy, tighten our movements and slow us down.

When we try too hard, our minds get trapped on a railroad track in a locomotive of desire that has faulty brakes. We lose the ability to see other possibilities and therefore we lose the abil-

ity to make turns and, more often than not, we slam into the buffers at the end of the track and the bottom of the hill...even though we could see the end of the tracks ahead.

So what's the down side?

Our muscles are too tight.

Our movements are jerky

Our minds are too tight

Our realm of possibility diminishes

We hurt ourselves

We become aware of our fears

So what's the up side?

Becoming aware that we are trying too hard

Facing our fears

Finding new ways of doing things.

Perhaps it is important as a first step to go through the process of trying too hard; only then, with the awareness of experience can we start to let go and begin to move into situations of flow.

I always look for that dawning of awareness in my students. As soon as a student sees that he or she is trying too hard it becomes possible to consciously relax either the mind or the muscles (or, more often, both). Invariably my students will tell me how much easier something becomes once the tension begins to drop away.

Unfortunately, all too often we have become so accustomed to doing things with tension, that the very act of becoming aware that the tension is present takes an extraordinary event.

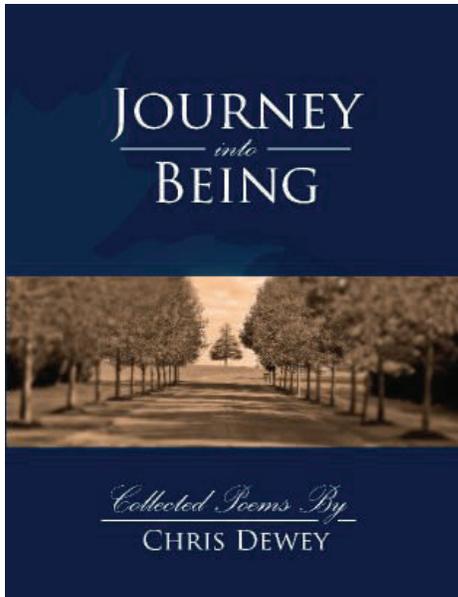
There is always the mantra that practice makes permanent...in this case, the more we practice doing things with tension, the seemingly easier it becomes and the harder it becomes to let the tensions go and reveal the true action.

So, the next time you are in class, regardless of your rank, ask yourself what is getting in your way. Where are you trying too hard?

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SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

- ◆ MISSISSIPPI JUDO TOURNAMENT, JACKSON, MS, NOVEMBER 10TH, 2007
- ◆ AKAYAMA WINTER CAMP, ORANGE BEACH, AL, JANUARY 19-20TH, 2008



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