

Pathways

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"Not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted counts"

Albert Einstein

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Passion

Aesop, the fabled Greek writer said that Passion should be the slave of Reason, and you might think that this is a reasonable precept for living. But if you ever talk to someone who has passion, you will be able to feel it the moment you meet them, and not without good reason.

We have spent a good bit of time recently talking about commitment and dedication, and we stagnate when we lose the passion and drive that we once had. The loss of passion can happen in our hobbies, our careers and our relationships.

As a point of departure, let me begin by saying that I envision passion like a fuel, it keeps the fires burning, it keeps us moving and it keeps us warm, it sustains us. Passion is what keeps us working into the long watches of the night. Passion drives us forward when we need to go the extra mile. Passion is what draws people to us and infects them with a desire to share the energy. Passion sees you through when doubt and fatigue would make of you a coward. Passion is a trampoline; it keeps us bouncing back!

So, how do you get it? How do you keep it? How do you nurture it?

I'm not sure that you get passionate about something unless it inspires you. For certain you can develop an interest in something and it can grow into an all-consuming passion, but it is difficult to *make* yourself passionate about something.

Keeping and nurturing passion is easier. Look for novelty, always. View your life through the eyes of a child. To a child, everything holds the po-

tential for discovery and discovery brings with it excitement and the pleasures of accomplishment. Children know all about awe and wonder; adults take stuff for granted and can be easily jaded by life.

In times of doubt, trouble and frustration, look to all the obstacles that you have already overcome to get where you are today. Look at how many times you overcame something that seemed impossible at the time.

One of the great things about the martial arts is that they are a great metaphor for life. The martial arts teach us about ourselves, our talents, skills and work ethic. My experience over the years has shown me that martial arts classes can have direct application to almost any aspect of our lives.

Bottom line? Inspiration is the spark that ignites passion. The flames of passion only die if we choose to let them. Like any fuel, however, passion is a renewable resource and needs to be replenished on a regular basis.

One of the reasons I write this newsletter is that I am passionate about writing, I am passionate about the martial arts and I am passionate about the development of the human spirit. For sure, there are times when the ideas flow like sludge, there are times when the computer screen is empty... but the frogs by the lake chatter to each other *all* night and there is always a sun in the sky the following day.

Passion is where you find it. Soak it up, bathe in it. Share it. That's why we run this martial arts school, and that's why it is generally one of the greatest things since sliced bread!☺

Kaizen

In the west we are all familiar with the idea that “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” What if there is more to it than that? Another phrase that we hear a lot on the same basic theme is: “Leave well enough alone.” Suppose that we are missing the point. Suppose that well enough...isn’t. I want to talk about the idea that even though it ain’t broke, it might be possible to make it better. I want to talk about Kaizen.

Kaizen is a Japanese word that relates to the notion of incremental improvement. Literally, it means “change for the better.” The Japanese word “Kai” means school and the word “Zen” means wisdom. It is most often associated with corporations and corporate management, but it can be taken to apply just as well at a personal level. In some respects you can look at kaizen as a way of life philosophy.

So what are we looking at?

There are three aspects of Kaizen that I want to investigate: Maintenance of current performance levels, Improvement of process and results and Strategic Innovation.

Let’s think in terms of:

- Lean Production (no wastage of time or resources)
- Non-judgmental ownership (of mistakes, errors and areas of potential improvement)
- Continuous, incremental improvement through process innovation. (make things work better)

When I talk about improvement here, I am not thinking so much about results, so much as process-based thinking. Let’s look at it like this. If I spend my time worrying about getting better results, but do nothing about how I achieve those results, then in all likelihood, I will be spinning my wheels. Conversely, if I look at the process by which I achieve my results,

and make improvements to the way I do things, the results will take care of themselves.

At the same time, I am not interested in parceling out blame or pointing fingers at why I am not improving, I am going to invest my effort in improving the process by which I achieve my results.

So, the first step is to make the strategic decision that not a single day will go by without making some kind of improvement in some aspect of your life *process*.

The next thing to recognize is that people, like corporations, make mistakes. The notion here is to take ownership of product quality and the quality of team management. Think of yourself like the CEO of a corporation., and ask the following questions: Is your team getting you where you want to go? Is the process you are using producing valuable results?

Once you know the answers to these questions you can move on to some work.

Step One: Organize. Sort things out. What are you supposed to be doing with your time and resources, talents and abilities? Are you doing these things?

Step Two: Systematize. Arrange what will get done and a time line by which it will be done. Create systems for getting things done.

Step Three: Clean and Lean. Clear out the clutter from your life, physically, mentally and emotionally. Keep a tidy world. Know where your stuff is! It’s easy to find a tool if you know where you put it last. Do not indulge in waste either of time or resources. Make everything count. Look for value in the action.

Step Four: Simplify. Maintenance is easy if you have simple systems. From this perspective I am a pragmatist. I like things to be as simple as possible, but no simpler. (I got that line from Einstein.) Complex

work patterns create opportunities for confusion, doubt and error in your work force.

Step Five: Discipline. You must have the self discipline to follow through and to keep following through. There is always room for improvement and no matter how good we think we might be at something, there is always something that can be done to improve things. Granted, there is a threshold of performance beyond which you get into a case of diminishing returns. But also at these times, the possibility of wholly new and unforeseen paradigms can sometimes emerge. It takes discipline to stay the course. It takes commitment.

In conclusion then, Kaizen is a path, which allows each of us to take ownership of where we are *right now* and to do something each and every day to move us towards where we wish to be. There is no room for criticism, condemnation or complaint in Kaizen. Kaizen is dynamic, affirmative and progressive.

Kaizen is the path of the person who is not satisfied with “good enough.” Kaizen is the path for the person who wants to discover his or her fullest potential and from that perspective, therefore, Kaizen is very exciting. Kaizen is also a deliberate choice and a determined effort, especially at first. Later, the practice of Kaizen becomes instilled and we do it without thinking. We find ourselves looking for a better way of doing something without apportioning blame or beating ourselves up over some perceived failure or error. We see what can be improved and we set about improving it, one step at a time.

Kaizen is the school of wisdom!

Put style in your character, it is a fine art.

Nietzsche

Taking a moment of respite

At this time of year we seem to get buried by deadlines and the holiday season seems to bring with it some extra stresses. I want to take a moment or two this month to once again write about reducing stress.

It has been well documented in the media and in the medical literature that taking time to relax and meditate helps to reduce stress. There are so many ways to meditate: Sitting in nature, going for a walk, listening to nature, listening to classical music, reading a book, doing martial arts, concentrating on your breathing or an image, taking a time of prayer.

The simple point is that mediation allows us to focus our awareness and bring it to bear on a single object of attention. The distractions of the mind are released and the mind begins to quieten itself down.

There are many ways in which we can focus the mind and undo the ravages of stressful living. The one thing that all of the examples I just gave have in common is that they involve “letting go”.

By “letting go through focused attention”, we release our grip on the things about which we stress and we allow the mind to relax. A relaxed mind can find solutions to problems more easily, is more efficient, is more precise and less prone to indulge in negative thought patterns.

With regular contemplative practice you will begin to discover that you are more aware of things around you on a daily basis. You notice little things. You become more mindful. For instance eating a meal becomes something wherein you can actually take the time to savor the flavors rather than gulp down a snack between meetings. The obvious benefit here is that you actually aid your digestion, which improves the ability of your body to process the raw materials nec-

essary for health and renewal.

There are so many more obvious benefits to contemplative attention. Taking just fifteen minutes at the beginning and the end of each day to bring the mind to a point of attention and to release the distractions of the day can reduce your heart rate, decrease your blood pressure, relax your muscles, improve blood flow and oxygen uptake as well as decrease your tension and improve the quality of your sleep.

When your body is not burning so much energy keeping your muscles tight, you will find that you have more energy to give to the things around you: Your work, your family and your friends. You might even find that you are less edgy and irritable.

Over time the process becomes a bio-feedback loop. We become aware of when we are stressed or tense and naturally take steps to alleviate the tensions that have accumulated.

By way of example, I was talking with one of my students the other day who was telling me that he didn't even realize that he was stressed, but had been told by several people recently that he was stressed. As I explained to the young man, stress is innocuous. We do not recognize small amounts of stress as it piles up and pretty soon we are carrying a lot of stress and we don't realize it until our physical world collapses with a stress-related illness. My student described himself as being near the edge of physical and mental collapse, but just kept going. Not two sentences earlier he had told me that he wasn't aware that he was stressed!

It never ceases to amaze me the number of students who tell me that they are stressing out over something in their lives and who then get some kind of ailment shortly thereafter or who keep getting nagging little injuries that

don't seem to heal.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to realize that stress depresses the immune system response and leaves us vulnerable to all manner of health issues.

In the martial arts I see stressed bodies as accidents waiting to happen. The human body is an amazing collection of articulating rods and elastic bands that work so wonderfully together when they are not under stress. Stressed bodies are jerky, tight and less efficient. An unstressed person practicing martial arts moves with a level of grace and elegance that completely eludes the stressed out student. Come to class one night and watch the students. You will notice beginners and advanced people who seem to move with ease and others in the same classes who seem to be moving with less grace. Watch the shoulders, the hips, the back, the neck, the limbs. Look for the stiffness and you will see where each student stores his or her stress. Then take a few moments to look at the students who move with ease and who seem to flow from one action to another. It's not necessarily a function of how good they are at the martial arts or even how much they know, it has just as much to do with the external stresses that have been absorbed by each student and carried along as part of the baggage.

So, this is where the rubber hits the road. Continually taking time to find peace and quiet in your day brings major rewards. When you bring the process of attention and focus to the martial arts you create a very powerful feedback loop that keeps you aware of your own levels of stress and provides a mechanism for stress reduction.

Living is not, supposed to be stressful. I think that we are supposed to live rich, full lives. It is sad to me that so often we let stress rob us of that richness. ☺

Gratitude or Regret

Robert Frost wrote a poem about two paths that diverged in a yellow wood. Actually he didn't; he wrote a poem about the choices we make in life.

One of those choices is to look back with an attitude of gratitude or an attitude of regret. In similar fashion we can look at our current circumstances with an attitude of happiness or disappointment.

In order to get this discussion started, I would like to start from the contentious position that to a greater or lesser extent we create the lives we choose to live.

I suspect that most of us have made mistakes in life of one kind or another. Likewise, I suspect that for few of us life worked out the way we expected or planned.

This is not to say that we didn't have some kind of plan of where we wanted to go, or even that we didn't achieve our goals in life. Rather, it is simply to state the obvious: None of us can see the road ahead and we therefore make our choices on the basis of incomplete information.

If I look at my life, there are a lot of goals that I have met, many that I exceeded beyond my wildest dreams and some that I let go along the way. When I look back over half a century I can see times when my life took turns that were completely unexpected. I can see many, but probably not all, of the mistakes that I have made and the price that others have paid for my choices.

More than that though, I can see the wonderful, unexpected things that have come to pass that I could not possibly have imagined when I embarked on some new part of the journey. I can see the amazing gift of learning that comes with just the mere act of living. I can see the world in which I live and the people I meet and can honestly say that I truly understand none of it. I have little moments of insight and small patches of knowledge, but I have never gotten past that childlike sense of awe and wonder of living in such a fascinating universe full of discovery, possibility and opportunity.

So this brings me to that question of gratitude or regret. It is probably fair to say that there are some things I regret, some choices I made that were lacking in wisdom and which caused pain or suffering either internally or to those around me. If I

am honest, some of those choices were deliberate and some of them were made out of ignorance. There is an aspect, however, that no matter what choices I have made, some good has come out of it.

We can choose to live in regret or we can choose to be grateful for the lessons learned and move ahead. A sense of gratitude equips each of us with an ability to see our mistakes in their true light, rather than brooding on them and allowing them to undermine our path to success. A sense of gratitude leaves us open to positive outcomes rather than creating a downward spiral of gloom and doom. Regret leaves us trapped, unable to undo the past and unable to accept the present for what it is. Gratitude leaves us free to embrace the present and look forward to the future with a sense of positive expectation.

From what I have just said, it will not be a surprise to you that I sometimes think that gratitude is the fuel of hope.

Oddly enough there is also a sense of the comedic about all of this too, which makes me smile and laugh. I can look at all the less-than-insightful choices that I have made in my life and yet, despite them all...(and in many ways, even despite myself), there is so much in my life for which I can offer thanks and be grateful, so much that makes me smile as I write these words and much that gives me hope for the future.

All of us are subject to the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune". All of us have choices about how we greet those slings and arrows. From a purely pragmatic perspective you could say that if something in life does not work out the way you would like, it would make more sense to greet it with a sense of gratitude and look for the positive outcome, rather than greet it with despair and regret and add a greater negative energy to the event. So it all comes down personal perspective and personal choice.

Every moment of every day you are being greeted by two roads in a yellow wood. Which one will you take? And...having taken the road, will you regret not taking the other one, or choose to enjoy the one upon which you set your feet? ☺

December						
S	M	T	W	T	F	S
31					1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30

November						
S	M	T	W	T	F	S
			1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30		

- ◆ Akayama Winter Camp, Orange Beach, AL, MLK weekend, January, 2007
- ◆ Columbus Judo Tournament, Columbus, MS, January 20th, 2007
- ◆ Tai Chi Clinic, Tupelo, MS, February 2nd-4th, 2007
- ◆ Wakamusha Judo Tournament, Atlanta, GA February 7th, 2007.

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