

CONNECTING SWORD, HAND, AND HEART

MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL ASPECTS OF MARTIAL COMBAT

HISTORICAL TEXTS, ANECDOTES FROM SUCCESSFUL FIGHTERS, MODERN SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

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I. CLASS PURPOSE

The primary goal of this class is to give you the tools to explore and understand how your mind works to support or impede your success in martial combat.

THE MIND IS A CRUCIAL, INTRINSIC ELEMENT IN YOUR FIGHTING.

Much of the material in here is probably 'Stuff you already know exists.'

- Point One: This 'Stuff' can be named.
- Point Two: It Matters.
- Point Three: You can control it.
- Point Four: In order to control it, you have to practice it.

The other major point I want to drive home is that ***Everyone is Different***. The challenges you have may or may not be anything like the challenges someone else has on the field. Finding what your 'problems' are, and how You work best, is a puzzle you have to solve for yourself. Again, this class is about tools, not necessarily solutions.

Exercise 1: Mind Map of Your Brain on Fighting

"If the fighter's goal is to control his thinking, emotions and physical state, he must first learn to be aware of them. You have to know how each component is operating before you can effectively change it."

II. PERCEPTUAL MOTOR LEARNING

Martial combat is a *Perceptual* Motor Skill. It involves :

- Cognition - involved thought processes
- Perception - interpretation of presented information
- Motor skills- physical movement and muscle control

All three of these aspects of the skill must be trained for maximum effectiveness in the execution of the art.

DR. ALAN GOLDBERG, WWW.COMPETITIVEDGE.COM:

Think about this: Getting good as a fighter in practice is 95% physical and 5% mental. Translation: You have to work hard on your conditioning and “physical game” to make it happen. However, once you step onto that floor for a match, the percentages flip flop. Being successful is 95% mental and 5% physical. You have the conditioning, technique and fight strategy, now you have to make sure that you stay calm under pressure and keep yourself focused on the right things. For example, your concentration needs to stay in the moment, on executing this technique and this technique only. If you let your mind jump ahead to the future, (i.e. thinking about winning or losing) or slip back to the past (i.e. a previous point or bout), then you’ll end up getting yourself too uptight and distracted to perform to your potential. This means that you have to be able to rebound quickly from your mistakes and not carry them into the next round or bout.

You have to believe in yourself and have the self-confidence to fight your own fight, rather than your opponent’s when you’re under pressure. You have to be able to handle last minute negativity and self-doubts. You have to be able to master your fears.

With a little work, these mental skills as well as a few important others can be systematically trained to the point where you develop the reputation as a mentally tough fighter.

THE BODY SUBSERVIENT TO THE MIND, FROM CAPO FERRO (CH1, 5-6):

*The efficient causes of this discipline are four: reason, nature, art, and practice. **Reason, as director of nature.** Nature, as potent virtue. Art, as regulator and moderator of nature. Practice, as minister of art. Reason directs nature... within reason is considered judgment and will. **Judgment discerns and understands that which must be done for its defense. Will inclines and stimulates it to its self-preservation... The body...in the role of servant executes the commandments of reason...***

Cognitive Skills-Intellectual skills that require thought processes

Perceptual Skills- interpretation of presented information

Motor Skills- movement and muscle control

Perceptual motor skills- involve the thought, interpretation and movement skills

Exercise 2: Visualization as a tool for Self-Analysis:

Recall a previous fight and analyze it:

Close your eyes and call up in your mind the memory of a really good fight: one where you were in the 'zone' and felt in control of the situation. Make sure you're inside your own body in this memory.

Think about your physical body first. Where were you tense and where were you relaxed? What was your energy level? What was your breathing like, your heartbeat? Did your movements feel forced or effortful, or was everything just natural, effortless, and flowing?

What was your mood? What were you thinking about while the fight happened? What were you saying to yourself? Were you confident in yourself? Did you feel like you were in control of your thoughts? Your emotions? Your body?

Do the same exercise, recalling a fight that went poorly, and notice the discrepancies between the two fights.

III. AROUSAL MANAGEMENT

It's very easy to get too amped up in your fight, or hold yourself back for a variety of reasons and not be amped up enough. Learning how to have the right level of arousal, and how to maintain that level, both mentally (in terms of focus) and physically (in terms of adrenaline) is a trainable skill.

FROM THE BOOK OF FIVE RINGS:

In strategy, your spiritual bearing must not be any different from normal. Both in fighting and in everyday life, you should be determined though calm. Meet the situation without tenseness yet not recklessly, your spirit settled yet unbiased. Even when your spirit is calm do not let your body relax, and when your body is relaxed do not let your spirit slacken. Do not let your spirit be influenced by your body, or your body be influenced by your spirit. **Be neither insufficiently spirited nor over spirited. An elevated spirit is weak and a low spirit is weak.** Do not let the enemy see your spirit.

FROM SPORTS-TRAINING-ADVISER.COM:

Find the Optimal Performance Zone. Reaction time and decision making are influenced by how aroused or stressed athletes are. Athletes at a high arousal level may detect a limited number of signals because their focus narrows.

Coaches can help athletes maintain an optimal arousal level through the use of breathing exercises, progressive relaxation, visualization, and meditation skills. Achieving the "zone" promotes effective information processing, minimizing the adverse influence of high level competition on decision making.

FROM DR RANDY BORUM, COMBATSPORTPSYCHOLOGY.BLOGSPOT.COM:

Optimal arousal (heh, heh... you said "arousal", heh, heh) is a key to performing effectively in competition. But what is "optimal"? Excellent question. Some of you might remember the old "Inverted U" hypothesis. In psychology books, it is known as the Yerkes-Dodson Law. The basic idea is that anxiety (or physiological arousal, more generally) in small to moderate doses tends to help competitive performance by accelerating your drive and energy. But at a certain point, arousal becomes too high and it begins to impair performance. When arousal is working for you, that's being in "the zone." Crank it up past that point, and the upward line in the upside down "U" begins to turn downward. Pretty basic.

But if you watch combat sport athletes, you've probably noticed an incredible range in emotional intensity – even among the winners. That seems to defy the idea that there is one optimal point for everyone.

An alternative to the Inverted U is the Individual Zones of Optimal Functioning -or IZOF model. The IZOF model suggests that "the zone" of optimal emotional and physiological intensity varies for each individual athlete. One of the areas where I've seen this most clearly with fighters specifically is in how they handle or use anger. ...

Anger can sometimes generate drive and energy. But it can also sometimes drain it. And it will often overshadow the part of your brain responsible for anticipation, planning and strategy. So there can be a steep cost as well.

FIGHTER ANECDOTES:

Don Colwyn Staghorn: Had a problem with taking it too seriously, and it held him back. He placed too much pressure and expectation on himself. Had to learn how to relax and have fun, and then his fight got better. "I stopped worrying and let the energy flow." "I basically stopped putting pressure on myself to do well. I was putting pressure on myself, and my game started to dip down."

Don Oliver Dogberry: Fun, non-competitive fighting, without aggression, prevented Don Oliver from really excelling, because while you can be a pretty good fighter with that attitude, it lacks the drive required to really dominate the field. But the idea of aggression was anathema to him: he's a big, powerful guy and didn't want to hurt people. He couldn't convince himself to be aggressive. Eventually, he re-framed: he didn't need to be aggressive- he could be assertive on the field. That was something he could get behind. With practice he learned to assert himself, control the fight and his opponent, and that allowed his fighting to rise to scarf-level.

Don Lot Ramirez: While anger can be kryptonite for many, Don Lot is an example of someone who uses it regularly in both tournament and practice to drive him to the next level.

Note for lady fighters and their teachers: Women's adrenaline response tends to have more inertia than men's.

TOOLS FOR MANAGING AROUSAL:

- Breathing
- Relaxation techniques
- Mindfulness
- Meditation
- To understand the effect of your arousal - Vision/Self-Analysis of previous fights

IV. FOCUS/CONCENTRATION:

This is probably the biggest and most important thing to train: how to stay in the moment, paying attention to the only thing you should be paying attention to—what’s going on right now.

Your conscious mind doesn’t have room for more than one thought at a time, but the thought you pick affects what programs your subconscious mind is executing, and heavily affects how efficiently it can act.

The mind affects the body, and the body affects the mind.

Exercise 4. Focus/Mindfulness Exercise

Face your opponent, and focus on their sword-hand and what it’s doing, and preventing it from touching you. Now fight, and keep your focus only on their forte, for as long as you can. If you catch your mind wandering, (to how you might attack them, or anything else), just note that you got distracted, and without judgment, guide your mind back to focusing on their sword-hand. Spend a minute doing this. If you get a touch, or your opponent gets a touch, with the same non-judging-ness, note it happened, reset the fight, and return to your focus: defending from their hand.

Now do the same thing, and switch your focus to their center chest. Then try focusing on their face. See how it feels different. Finally, try broadening your awareness to no particular point on their body, but keep focused only on the fight that is happening now.

ON MINDFULNESS, FROM DR. RANDY BORUM:

The essence of mindfulness is learning to be quietly focused in the present moment- the “here and now” - while non-judgmentally observing – and not reacting to - your perceptions, sensations, thoughts and emotions.

Researchers got 142 psychology students to work on a series of word puzzles within certain time limits, but the first of the puzzles did not have any real solution. This created a situation where they were supposed to persist on a task, even after finding the first attempt to be impossible.

Learning not to judge or evaluate (nonjudging) and not to react (nonreactivity) to what’s going on inside you is the tricky part of mindfulness, but they are vital ingredients, according to the study. The better the subjects were in not judging or reacting, the more persistent they were. Researchers found the subjects were aware of what they were experiencing – positive and negative – but their mindful stance allowed them not to be self conscious about it.

Some researchers believe that people need to be self critical to motivate them to persist toward a goal. This research suggests otherwise. Those who were internally aware but self-conscious – focusing on the discrepancy between how they are doing and what they want to achieve – were less persistent. The researchers conclude the mindfulness may be a promising strategy for self-regulating behaviors, thoughts and emotions.

Evans, D., Baer, R., & Segerstrom, S. (2009). The effects of mindfulness and self-consciousness on persistence Personality and Individual Differences DOI: 10.1016/j.paid.2009.03.026

V. MENTAL TOUGHNESS:

Believing you can succeed on the field is a crucial prerequisite to success. If you think you'll fail, you probably will. "A strong mind may not win you an Olympic medal, but a weak mind will lose you one."

Toughness: The ability to take a hit and keep going. Controlling your physiological and mental response to stimulus. Endurance can be physical toughness, can also be mental toughness. The ability to not doubt yourself, to believe in a fight, to not mentally give up even in a taxing fight." This is something that has to be built the same way physical toughness has to be built.

Many people get caught up in their failures, and in black-and-white thinking. "Oh, I just got touched. I've screwed up; I failed; I suck; the other person's just better than me; darn it, I know I'm better than they are!; I'm never gonna get this,"

Alternatives: "Oh, I just got touched...."

- "Can I learn from that?"
- "But I was really successful in defending the previous 6 passes, and I forced him to snipe at my arm. That was way better than last time...that drilling is paying off!"
- "I underestimated you, my friend. Now face the next level of my game!" *cue power-up music*
- "Man, that was a pretty move she just made! She is ON today."
- *crickets* that was a moment ago. Only the now exists.

Tool 0: "Be careful how you talk to yourself, because you are listening."

Become aware of your Self-Talk, and eliminate all negativity from it. You MUST practice in order to control your self-talk.

Sir Angelo started when he was 18, trying to go for a week without saying anything negative to himself. Every time he caught himself the week started over. It took him a year to go a week without catching himself doing it.

Tool 1: Practice finding the state of No-Mind.

Bruce Lee calls it a "Mind like water." Learn to be ONLY in the present moment during your fight. Stay the course regardless of what just happened, in fact, what just happened shouldn't exist anymore, nor what is about to happen. Only what IS happening.

Tool 2: Cultivate a Growth Mindset

If you believe you can always get better, then it doesn't matter where you are in your development, and it need not matter how you compare to the opponent you happen to be facing. No matter how you're doing or how you just did, whether you won or lost your fight, your goal is simply to perform to the best of your ability, to learn, and to grow. Winning, when you do so, becomes a marker of your success, but is no longer the success itself.

FROM DR. RANDY BORUM, "A WINNING MINDSET," APRIL 2008

Research conducted by Stanford psychology professor, Carol Dweck has shown that most people have one of two types of "mindset": Fixed mindset or Growth mindset. Those with a fixed mindset believe that their positive traits and potential for success are essentially fixed. You have them – in whatever amount - or you do not. On the other hand, those with a growth mindset are more grounded in "possibilities." They believe that positive traits and skills can be developed and that they can overcome failures to ultimately achieve success.

In rebounding from a loss, your mindset will affect how you understand and explain what happened. Developing some explanation – for yourself and for others - for the loss is usually the first step in determining whether and how you will move forward. Losing can be devastating for a fixed mindset competitor because they will assume they lost because they were "just not good enough."

FROM DR. RANDY BORUM, "PERFECTIONISTS DESERVE A BREAK"

...Researchers have found that perfectionism has at least two different parts (or facets) – each has somewhat different effects on performance. One facet is a positive striving for perfection, which is shown in "having high personal standards, setting exacting standards for one's performance, and striving for excellence" (Stoll, Lau, & Stoeber, In Press). The other facet has been called "self critical perfectionism," which involves "critical self-evaluations of one's performance, concern over mistakes, and feelings of discrepancy between expectations and results" (Stoll, Lau, & Stoeber, In Press).

Studies have found that those who have a strong positive striving for perfection have a more positive mood, more endurance, better performance, less anxiety, and more confidence in competitive endeavors. But – and here's the catch – those benefits can fizzle out for those who also possess a high degree of self critical perfectionism. That self-criticality has been linked to depression, stress, increased competitive anxiety, less confidence during competition, decreased performance, and burnout.

CAPO FERRO DOESN'T THINK YOU NEED TO BE INSTANTLY PERFECT EITHER. (CH1, 10):

Art regards nature and sees that owing to the small capacity of matter, it cannot do all that which it intends to do, and yet considers in many details its perfections and imperfections, and in the role of architect seizes thereof and makes some beautiful model, and thus refines and sharpens the rough-hewn things of nature, rendering them little by little to the height of their perfection.

Tool 3: Dehumanize Your Opponent (Just During Your Fight)

This may sound controversial, but many good fighters I've interviewed stop thinking about their opponent as their friend or kind-of even as a person for the duration of the fight. The instant the fight is over, it's important that your opponent be a person again, but during the fight, worrying about them or their experience may get in your way.

- For Don Todde, the opponent becomes irrelevant within the void-state, they're just part of the scene he's observing and reacting to.
- For Sir Angelo, the opponent is sometimes 'a piece of meat.'
- For Lady Mora, the opponent is an agent of the Art.
- For Don Mallory and many others, they own the eric, and their opponent is an intruder to the space.
- Many fighters have particular trouble facing their teachers, or fighters wearing any kind of white accessory. A different mental tactic may be needed with your 'bugaboo' opponents. When Sir Angelo broke through this barrier, he said to a friend, "I'm done losing fights I don't need to lose."

VALERIE WORTHINGTON, FROM *BREAKINGMUSCLE.COM*, ON 'THE AGENT OF THE ART':

*"I didn't beat you because I'm a badass. **It's the art.** What happened just now just means the art works." I reminded him of how long we had been training relative to each other, and then I asked him, "What are you here to learn? Jiu jitsu, right? So you must think there's something to it. Otherwise why would you bother? But you can't have it both ways. You can't value the art enough to spend hours learning how to apply it but then get mad when it's effective at your expense."*

*In retrospect, I realized by framing the issue in this manner, I had given this student a way to square the realities of what it takes to learn BJJ with the requirements of his ego. I had provided a cognitive loophole. **Yes, I was the one who beat him, but I just happened to the agent of jiu jitsu at that moment.** That didn't need to be the focus for either of us.*

*My coach and friend Seph Smith has an interesting perspective. He said when he's training for his own development, he closes his eyes, and his partner in some real way ceases to exist, except insofar as that person is giving him reactions he can use to test his own execution of jiu jitsu. **For him, it becomes an experimentation session, where the "winning" and "losing" falls away and the concepts of "more and less effective" take over.** He is testing his application of the art, looking for optimal strategies, and his partner becomes the testing ground.*

...Framing in this way the discussion of winning and losing may help people who are doing more "losing" than "winning" (at least in their own mind) embrace the losses and build on them.

Tool 4: Create Mental Anchors

Many experienced fighters use the salute to their consort, or setting into guard, mantras, or mental soundtracks to drop themselves into the optimal fighting headspace they've cultivated.

When beginning to develop a mental anchor, be careful not to use the trigger randomly, but only when you're in the mental space you want to be triggering. If you want to learn more about these kinds of triggers, look into *Neuro-Linguistic Programming*.

Exercise 5: Visualization to Prepare for a Match or Confidence-Build:

Mindhack 1: When faced with a situation, your mind and body's natural response is based on your remembered response in similar previous moments. So, you're going to create a 'memory' of the fight you want to have. Pull liberally from your best previous fights, or even from your own imagination, to build the scene you want to experience.

Imagine the fight you want to have, using the same details as the recall visualization above. Create the scene in as much vivid detail as you can. Imagine how you think you'll experience in the situation, and how you want to feel and act. Take yourself through the whole match, from beginning to end: Imagine finding out who your opponent is, selecting weapons, heralding and salutes, coming into guard. Imagine responding to your opponent, or inciting them to response. Imagine you get hit and lose a limb, and how you'll respond to that, or imagine taking one of their limbs, or double-killing and needing to start over. Imagine striking them, defeating them, how it feels to make that kill, how you'll feel afterward.

Mindhack 2: You might have a hard time imagining how it feels to succeed at something you haven't done before—defeating a white scarf/knight, or winning the final round in a tournament. Your brain labors under an insistent belief that 'You can't do that', and you just can't imagine yourself succeeding...your mind just doesn't buy that it's even possible. External visualization teaches your gullible brain that yes, *of course* you can, because you've SEEN yourself do it.

Instead of being inside your own mind/body, try stepping outside. Take the role of a spectator, and see yourself as you succeed perfectly at the thing you're trying to do. Imagine watching from the eric ropes as you make that killing blow or perfect attack. Again, create as much detail as possible in the scene. Visual images you create in your mind can have as much power as the real experience, in terms of setting programs for how you'll feel, what you'll think, and even what hormones your body releases.

Mindhack 3: For those that are persona-driven, it may be useful to envision your heroic persona walking out onto the field to fight, perhaps first externally, then see if you can break into their headspace and 'be' them.

VI. IN CONCLUSION...PRACTICE!

FROM THE BOOK OF FIVE RINGS:

If you merely read this book you will not reach the Way of strategy. Absorb the things written in this book. Do not just read, memorize, or imitate, but **so that you realize the principle from within your own heart, study hard to absorb these things into your body.**

Mental Stuff to Drill/Focus on at Practice:

- 1. Practice fighting in ‘Tournament Headspace’**
 - a. “Regular Tournament Fight”**
 - b. “Finals of Crown/Rapier Open/QC Drill”**
- 2. Develop your mental anchors/mantras/soundtracks/triggers**
- 3. Practice to develop Mental Toughness**
 - a. Watch your arousal levels and what affects them.**
 - b. Watch your self-talk and emotions in various circumstances**

What are you saying to yourself as you fight? What emotions are rising? Are those things pulling your concentration away from your fight? Every time you find yourself getting upset or distracted, practice mindfulness, and let go of undesirable thoughts, without judging yourself for having had them. Just move easily back into focus.

c. Observe how your mind affects your body, and body affects mind

MUSASHI’S ‘STANCE IN STRATEGY’ FROM THE BOOK OF FIVE RINGS

Adopt a stance with the head erect, neither hanging down, nor looking up, nor twisted. Your forehead and the space between your eyes should not be wrinkled. Do not roll your eyes nor allow them to blink, but slightly narrow them. With your features composed, keep the line of your nose straight with a feeling of slightly flaring your nostrils. Hold the line of the rear of the neck straight: instill vigor into your hairline, and in the same way from the shoulders down through your entire body. Lower both shoulders, and without the buttocks jutting out, put strength into your legs from the knees to the tips of your toes. Brace your abdomen so that you do not bend at the hips.

d. Check your Breathing

DR. RANDY BORUM, COMBATSPORTSPSYCHOLOGY.BLOGSPOT.COM:

*Your muscles need oxygen to function properly. Tense muscles require even more oxygen, because tension is a muscular action. Your body gets most of its oxygen from the air you inhale. **If you are not inhaling, you are not providing a steady supply of oxygen to your muscles***

or to your other vital organs that require it – like your brain and eyes. This produces a higher “oxygen cost” and ultimately causes your mind and body not to perform as well as they should. Holding the breath for too long can also spike your blood pressure and cause dizziness. Your muscles definitely get tired more quickly. The result is that you become winded in a very short time. There are other problems too, but you get the idea.

Sir Angelo chews gum. Your body is good at not allowing you to choke...or hold your breath.

4. Practice Broadening/Narrowing/Directing Your Perception

Practice finding the state of focus that works best for you. This might be not focusing on anything in particular, or progressively widening your focus to take in the whole scene. Remember, when you're thinking about things, your sensory perception shuts down more and more. If your mind is clear your perception will be broader.

FROM THE BOOK OF FIVE RINGS:

The Gaze in Strategy: The gaze should be large and broad. This is the twofold gaze of perception and sight. Perception is strong and sight weak. In strategy it is important to see distant things as if they were close and to take a distanced view of close things. It is important in strategy to know the enemy's sword and not to be distracted by insignificant movements of his sword. You must study this.

Sir Martino (5x Duke of Calontir) speaks about 'stealing focus,' becoming so aware of your opponent that you know when they're going to blink, have relaxed, when their brain is taking a break and they've lost focus. Tora Taka is also known for this kind of thing. In order to do this, you have to be completely focused on your opponent.

5. Remembering what happened in your fight

Try stopping immediately after a fight to recall, visually, what just happened. Perhaps keep a journal and writing the details down. Remember to look not only at what physically happened, but what you were thinking about, what you were trying to do, etc.

Sir Angelo says when his focus is on, time dilates for him, and the fight becomes 'conversational', while his opponent seems to be operating very slowly. It's easy for him to see and remember what happened when time is moving so slowly.

6. Don't Stop Asking Why

Anything that isn't working for you is working against you. There is an underlying reason for how you feel and act. Dig until you find the cause or trigger, and understand whether you can alter, redirect, or work within it. **You cannot fight your opponent if you are fighting yourself.**

AND P.S. A LOT OF WHAT WE JUST COVERED...HIGHLY RELEVANT IN YOUR REAL LIFE, TOO!