

Concentrate the Mind

“Concentrate your mind,” the teacher says to the student. At least that was what the teacher in the movie I was watching said to his student. Certainly sounds like good advice, but what, precisely, does it mean? If you ask Mrs. McGillicuddy, your third grade teacher, she would no doubt say, “It means to focus, dearies. You must focus on a subject to get anything done.” And so, to various levels success, adults have learned to focus their minds at work and, probably to a greater level of success, have learned to defocus their minds when out of work.

This advice may be more true than false, but it is somewhat inaccurate. Often the male of the species tends to focus at work, often making him the dogged workhorse popular with the management. Because he is not as talented as his female cohorts at multi-tasking, he makes his inability to spread his focus a virtue—the virtue of concentration. When he gets home however, it is time to decompress. He does this so automatically that he does not even realize that he is ignoring his wife, girlfriend, or significant other, who, having multi-tasked all day, would like some concentrated attention from him, ironically just at the time when he is looking forward to vegetating and putting his mind on a Vague setting.

At work, the female exec makes use of her talent for multitasking and knows how to appoint the correct concentrators to jobs that need a single focus. When she comes home, she is ready to concentrate on fewer things, but often is swept up in the momentum of her multi-tendriled talent, managing both to pay attention to hubby, boyfriend, or significant other while cooking and catching the 7:00 news.

Who focuses better and why would you say one is better than the other? Since this essay is not an introduction to *Mars and Venus in the Dojo*, please concentrate on the idea of concentrating vs. multi-tasking rather than the gender rôles.

When teaching a martial art, Sensei McGillicuddy might just admonish the members of the class to focus on the kata movement, kumite, waza, or exercise at hand. Why? Obviously it is because “You must focus on a subject to get anything done.” Unfortunately, this advice is a half-truth. Of course, you cannot veg-out like the guy plopping on the couch after a long day at the office, but also you cannot overthink what the instructor is trying to teach in a piecemeal fashion.

I cannot estimate how many times, while teaching an application to a kata movement, I find my karate students jumping two steps ahead (thinking they can handle more than one step at a time) while at the same time misunderstanding the detail I am trying to impart by asking them to perform only one concentrated step at a time.

Zen teachers found that if a meditating monk’s concentration waivered, a rap on the shoulder with a flat stick helped bring him back to their alternate reality. Pain or the threat of pain concentrates the mind. Thus, having been unsuccessful at getting several students to focus of the detail of a technique we are studying, I ask them to line up for one-step sparring. I tell the attacker the precise attack I would like, and instruct the defender to apply only the blocking section of the movement we have been studying. Eager to symbolically emerge

dominant from the pseudo-encounter, they rush through the block and apply the counterattack a little too fiercely and rapidly. Sometimes they seem to dominate out of sheer strength and speed (even though they know that is not what we are studying) and sometimes they simply fail, running into a rigid attacker. Then, they look over at me as if I had taught them something wrong! *But I had asked for only the block.* Knowing their skill level could handle the multi-tasking of stringing two or three movements together, they had rushed past the block, not even noticing that it did not function properly, and into the retaliation.

By the way, both men and women do this, regardless of how poorly men multitask and how well women do. Sensei McGillicuddy would obviously disapprove. But wait! Give the students a few years and a few ranks and, Lo and Behold, they discover, to their own frustration, that their skill sets reverse!

More on unconcentrating the mind, next time.