

Un-concentrate the Mind

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!

Building physical skills in martial techniques requires concentration. Some skills come easily and seem “logical”; others are exactly what you would not expect them to be.

It is like learning the vocabulary of a foreign language. You must memorize every word you may need to speak the language. Knowing how to put those words together will not help you if you have nothing with which to build a sentence or even a phrase.

I used to detest vocabulary building when I was studying languages in high school and college. I found it both tedious and frustrating because I could not use my well-developed logical skills to figure out a foreign word unless it was a cognate for a word in another language that I had already learned. Even then I could get into trouble. For example, the French word “currently” is *au moment*. It comes from the Latin *in momento*. In Portuguese it can be *no momento*. Also in Portuguese, and in Spanish, it is *actualmente*. In Italian, however, the closest language to Latin, it is *currente*, and in German, allegedly quite different from Latin, it is *aktuell*, which mysteriously is more like Portuguese and Spanish than either Latin or French. Without understanding the whole history of language drift, one can see that logic does not enter the picture.

Therefore, as your third grade teacher Mrs. McGillicuddy told you, “You must focus on a subject to get anything done,” at least if that subject requires individuation. But what if it requires intelligent combination? Having learned all the useful individual words of your chosen foreign language does not mean you can speak, read, write, or understand the language. Even the most basic sentences must have somewhat correct syntax to mean what you want them to mean. Similarly, you can have mastered every block in every kata in every style of karate, but if you have not also mastered stance, movement, timing, and direction, your blocks alone (the very items that you learned with a concentrated mind) will do you no good.

The astute reader may object, claiming that martial responses do not require an un-concentrated mind but a mind concentrated on more than one item, in other words, a mind truly skilled in multi-tasking. Dear astute reader, you may, in fact, be right—at first. But you know as well as I that concentration is both deliberate and slow while self-defense application is neither. At some point in your development as a martial artist, you have to trust that your days of mindful concentration have produced a set of reactions that will simply flow out almost mindlessly (although perhaps not completely so).

Students want to make their learning practical ASAP. To that end, they try to flow before they even now how to float. They try to combine before they have items with which to combine—or more precisely, they try to combine items that have not been mastered mindfully.

To combine those items, one must un-concentrate a mind that has previously been concentrated.

Let's return to Mrs. McGillicuddy. She was right to demand more focus from you and your childhood classmates because, frankly my friend, as a child you were a bit of an airhead. Children are understandably distractible, which is part of the reason why there have been so few Mozarts. But Sensei McGillicuddy (assuming she is teaching a class of adults and not third graders) must demand more of you. First, you should concentrate (focus). Then, you should broaden your concentration (multitask). Then, trust in your training and become like water, my friends (as Bruce Lee was wont to say)—fluid, shapeless, unpredictable, but able to be contained, controlled, and predicted.

Concentrated water is power, but it is used in predictable circumstance. It is, as it were, potential power. A raging flood is much less predictable. If it could be analyzed after the fact, I think we'd find it also functions by certain rules, yet manages to manifest without them.