

Mind Training and the Martial Arts

You're in the middle of a competitive round of sparring in Jiu-Jitsu class and your training partner is turning the intensity level up in an attempt to pass your guard. You try to remember the technical details of a sweep but before you can put it all together, your mind jumps to a possible submission and then to another half-remembered sweep. As your opponent drives forward with a pass, your thoughts drift off to a conversation you had with your boss at work that day or the errands you have to run on the way home from the gym. In any case, by the time your attention comes back to the mats, you are stuck under side control and without considering what has brought you to this position you become lost in feelings of frustration and anger. "He's too strong," you lament inwardly. "I hate training with this guy." As you strive desperately to create space from the bottom you lose track of where your left arm is and before you can make an adjustment, your arm is caught in an Americana. An Americana! There's no way you're going to tap to that. That's a rookie move and he's just got you because he's so much stronger than you and...POP. You are brought violently back to the present moment and yelp out, "Tap!" before your shoulder pops again. Shuffling off to the change rooms at the end of class, you think to yourself, "He's lucky it's not a real fight because then I'd show him."

Call this a portrait of an ego-driven martial artist. It may be an exaggerated portrayal but can you relate to any of this? Even now, you might be saying, "This doesn't apply to me" or "So what? If I don't train aggressively and competitively then I'll never get any better!" For a moment, please put these ideas aside and try to read this article while being mindful of any ego-driven thoughts. We all respond to the stresses of training in different ways: some retreat into random mental chatter while others become clouded by emotional responses like anger and frustration or even delusions of grandeur. In all cases, the results are the same: our performance is less efficient than it could have been, our chances of injury or the injury of others increases and we leave training without becoming better martial artists. Clearly, there is a problem with this way of approaching training. I think it is important to identify the nature of this problem before we can begin to talk about a solution.

As I always say to the students in our Mat Monsters children's program, "If you don't know how to listen, then you can't learn." We take it for granted that, as adults, we have mastered this important skill or assume that the ability to focus and pay attention is something we are able to do at any given moment. But is this true? To what extent have we actually just given up on developing this faculty? In a moment, I'm going to ask you to stop reading this article and do a little experiment. It requires that you be in a distraction-free environment for a few minutes. I want you to set a timer on your watch or cell phone to count down for three minutes. If you don't have a timer, use this one: <http://www.online-stopwatch.com/>. The instructions for this experiment are simple: in a comfortable seated or standing position, spend the next three minutes breathing in a normal and natural way while keeping entirely still. During this time, the goal is to pay attention to your breath without becoming distracted by any thoughts. Okay, go ahead, spend the next three minutes not thinking about anything. I'll be here when you get back.

Let me guess, you spent the last three minutes in a state of serene calm. There was no nervous movement or twitching, your eyes remained still while taking in everything in your field of vision and

your mind tracked the slow in and out of your breath without becoming lost in thoughts or emotional experiences. Or maybe not. If you are like most human beings, the stated goal was an impossible feat. Perhaps your hands twitched and moved, your eyes shifted and darted as you looked around the room. Maybe your attention drifted away from your breath repeatedly or you spent most of the entire three minutes lost in a corridor of memories of the past or expectations for the future. Perhaps you can identify the problem for yourself now. How can you expect to focus during the chaos and stress of combative training if you can't do it while sitting in a quiet room? How can you pay attention for the five minutes that it takes for the instructor to explain the details of a new technique if you can't pay attention to your breathing for three? How can you clearly identify and defend against a technique that your opponent is about to execute if your mind is clouded by emotional disturbances?

“Don't just do something, sit there!”

You'll be glad to know that there are methods to train your mind that have a very long and successful tradition. Like any physical training regimen, you will have to dedicate a certain amount of time to this practice, and not expect results overnight. Since our birth, we have been developing habitual patterns of mental chatter and this will not change without creating new, intentional mental patterns to replace them. We'll begin with the training environment. It will be beneficial if you find a quiet space where you know you will not be distracted by excessive noise. Choose an area that is clean and free of clutter. By intentionally creating an environment that is orderly, you invite your mind to mirror this outward state. Next, we move to the physical body. Position yourself in a way that is comfortable, but purposeful. You might sit in a chair or cross-legged on the floor. I don't recommend lying down in the early going as your mental training might easily become naptime. Place your arms and hands in a comfortable position and keep your back straight and your head up. One way of achieving a sitting posture that is both purposeful and comfortable is to sit up in a very straight and rigid manner and then let your body relax by about ten percent. You are now positioned in a way that suggests quiet confidence and naturalness and for the duration of your training session, you will maintain this position. You should be fairly strict with the posture but also follow the adage, “not too tight, not too loose.” By this I mean, don't fidget and shift around or let your back slouch, but if your nose gets itchy, go ahead and scratch it! Finally, choose a point a few feet in front of you and fix your gaze there. Once again, do not be too rigid with this. Allow your visual focus to soften so that you can take in everything in your field of vision while your eyes remain still and relaxed.

Now that your body is committed to a position, what should you do with your mind? Well, nothing. This type of practice might be described as the art of trying without trying. Breathe in a way that is natural and relaxed and bring your mental attention to this basic activity. There is the story of the student of meditation who felt that paying attention to his breath was boring. He went to his master to ask if there wasn't something more interesting that he could meditate on. The master led his student to a river and, together, they walked out into the water. Once there, the master grabbed the student and held him underwater. The student kicked and flailed wildly as he tried to get his head back above the water. Finally, the master let him go and student stood up, gasping for air. “Funny,” said the master, “you seemed to find breathing very interesting just now!” It is this same kind of gratitude for our ability to breathe that we should bring to our practice. Inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale, inhale, “I've

got to take the garbage out.” Bing! A thought! Where did that come from? What do I do with it? Well, exactly nothing. The next time you breathe out, let the thought go with it and let your attention return to your breathing. Don’t worry about whether you’ve had a good thought or a bad thought. Don’t attempt to hold on to that brilliant idea that just popped into your head. It will be there for you after your practice. Just as we wouldn’t stop in the middle of a round of sparring to go check Facebook, we don’t get caught up in distractions when we’re doing our mental training. Inevitably, there will be times when our thoughts lead us a long, long way from our bodies and our breath. In those cases, the method is the same: we return our attention to our breath. It is important to not become frustrated or heavy-handed in our approach. It is not a failure if you get lost in thought, it is an opportunity to continue your training. Even if you do become frustrated with your mind’s inability to focus, you can apply the same method to this frustration: breathe out the frustration and return your attention to your breath.

Does this sound like a boring way to spend your time? Would you rather be playing a video game or doing something “useful”? Do you think this type of training can’t possibly benefit you? Well, the only response I can give to any of these questions is: try it and see for yourself. There is an ancient tradition stretching back through human history of people who have directly experienced the benefits of this kind of practice. Perhaps you are thinking, “It’s all in their heads!” To this, I reply, “Exactly.” As you first explore this kind of training, it will seem like the practice is making your brain speed up and think all kinds of things. I assure you this is nothing new. You have been thinking all kinds of things all along. It’s just that now you are noticing it. Start with just ten minutes each day and see where that leads you. The journey that you are undertaking is yours and yours alone. There is no one else who can tell you how you should proceed.

As you train your mind in this way, you will find that there are many applications of this skill. One that I always employ in my training is to approach each sparring match with a clear mind. I take a deep breath and as I exhale, I let go of any expectations that I may have about the outcome of the training. If I am successful in applying a technique, then it is no big deal. Instead of spending any time “celebrating” I am observing the details that allowed it to be successful. In this way, I am more likely to be successful in the future. If my opponent is successful in applying a technique on me, it is also no big deal. I am only interested to learn what has allowed the technique to be successful and since my mind is not clouded with any emotional reaction, I can more easily understand what has happened. In the future, I will be more prepared to prevent the technique. It is truly the art of trying without trying. One might think that it is difficult to become highly skilled without having an ego-driven approach to training but many of the best competitors in the world are those who have mastered this kind of focused calm.

Mind Over Matter: Marcelo Garcia vs. Ricco Rodriguez

The Absolute division of the 2005 World Grappling championships featured a study in contrasting mental approaches. Outweighed by about 80 pounds, Marcelo Garcia took on Ricco Rodriguez in a classic “David vs. Goliath” match. From the outset, Rodriguez attempted to break Garcia’s concentration with aggressive bullying tactics that, while technically within the rules of the contest, were met with boos from the crowd. Employing shoves that bordered on strikes (illegal under grappling rules) and a tendency to quickly flee from engaging, Rodriguez was fighting a “dirty” match. Garcia could have easily

become frustrated but his focus did not waver. Throughout the match, he resolutely maintained his composure and followed his strategy with a single-mindedness that completely ignored the tactics of his opponent. As the match continued, it was Rodriguez who began to mentally unravel. Finding no way of overcoming the technique of Garcia, he continually backed away and became visibly frustrated. In the final moments of the match, Rodriguez showed that he was mentally defeated. With Garcia on his back, working on a choke, Rodriguez committed a flagrant foul by slamming himself backward on the mats to try and crush Garcia. Boos erupted from the crowd as the match was stopped. Garcia took a deep breath, sat up and calmly waved his hand as if to say, "No big deal." In a later interview, he admitted that he felt like his chest had exploded from the impact. Astoundingly, the match was restarted and Rodriguez was not penalized for his clear rule violation. In fact, he was given a dominant position from which to start from. At this point, one might imagine that Garcia would be enraged and lodging complaints with anyone who would listen. The continued chorus of boos from the crowd seemed to back up this approach but as the match restarted, Garcia did what he had done the entire time. He executed his gameplan with a focused, determined calm. Clearly deflated, Rodriguez seemed to have no fight left in him. Garcia quickly escaped and applied an ankle lock that forced his opponent to tap instantly.

Mind training will not turn every martial artist into a world champion but it can turn your mind into an ally. If you have a little voice in your head that tells you that you are no good, you will find it easier to dismiss those kinds of doubts. If you have a bad temper that flares up when you get "beat," you will find yourself calming down and enjoying your training more. If you get distracted easily and forget your techniques, you will find it easier to stay focused on a gameplan. These benefits alone are amazing, considering that the training only requires ten minutes per day and costs nothing. You've got nothing to lose but your ego.