

The Roots of Technical Mastery

Awareness, Harmony, Right Action

Part 1

In martial arts practice, as in daily life, we are called upon to exercise our awareness to its maximum. If we falter in our focus, we may find it impossible to maintain mental, emotional or spiritual balance in our moment-to-moment experience.

Awareness can be described in many different ways. We may be sensitive to our surroundings and notice the weather, animal behavior or the ever-changing soundscape. Sometimes we are aware of another's intentions, we may be aware of a strange intuitive sensation. At times, we are aware of our own subjective world, our inner guidance and direction, but more often than not we float like a leaf in the wind. We can live our lives in a numb state and be painfully unaware of the richness that our world has to offer or we can open our awareness through martial arts training.

So, what is awareness and why is it important in the study of the martial arts, or anything else for that matter. Is it possible to develop our awareness further and how might we achieve that goal. Through this series of articles, I will explore how awareness can have a profound effect on the quality of our experience, whether we are under heavy load training in the Dojo or struggling under emotional, physical and psychological strain. We will see how awareness is the pivotal point to understanding the development and application of our individual arts and also the foundation of unifying principles that transcend individual style and form.

I must admit that, many times I have been caught painfully unaware of critical things in my life. My friend Janos has helped to explain this to me and he used the analogy of a person with a paper shopping bag over their head. He says that we can live in a world of illusion because we only see a small portion of



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what is happening around us at any given time. Because our view is incomplete, we often make things up or infer things about the world that are just not true. We are often uncomfortable with a “void” so we struggle to fill it with information that makes sense in our existing and incomplete world-view. If you picture a bag over your head with many small holes cut in the bag, you may start to get the point of what I am talking about. You will see out through the small holes but you will see the world in fragmented and restricted ways. In the case of the bag analogy, we are restricted by the physical presence of the bag and it may not take much creativity or imagination to see a solution to this dilemma. By simply removing the bag, we can recapture our view of the world in its entirety. In reality, it is much more difficult, at times, because the bag that restricts our true vision is a complex construction. We often find that personal issues, cultural influences and natural laws all filtered through varying levels of societal development shield us from the true nature of things.

When we quest for the truth, initially, it is easily found by observing natural law. There is no denying that there is gravity or light or heat or numerous other forces in the universe. These forces exist, even if we deny their existence and they exist even if we are completely unaware of them. We can struggle against natural laws all we want but it does not mean that they are not there and acting on our world and reality. Our lack of awareness does not hinder the action of natural law in any way. In fact, some of the most difficult things that happen in our lives are a direct reflection of natural laws that we either have been unaware of or have chosen to disregard.

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Part 2

Do you remember the first time you tried to ride a bicycle? What changed between the times when you struggled, fell, and scraped your knees and elbows and the times you found freedom and balance? Did any of the natural laws change or did you just harmonize with them in some intuitive way? We know that a large weight can be lifted if leverage is applied, ask anyone who played on the childhood “teeter totter”. It is true that a joint or bone can be broken with the application of force multiplied through the application of leverage, anyone who has broken a toe or finger while training is painfully aware of this truth. Consider, it is possible to knock down even the largest strongest person with the correct application of disturbed balance and momentum, ask anyone who has slipped on ice and fallen on their butt.



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The point here is this; natural laws exist and functions just fine, even in the absence of our awareness. Our lives and martial arts practice can become very difficult if we are continuously moving against natural law. Some of the most shocking events in our lives are a direct result of natural law coming up and biting us on the butt to remind us of our lack of awareness. Sometimes life can feel like we are swimming upstream and everything may feel like a fight, but it does not have to be that way. Awareness can open our eyes to a sense of harmony and balance. This often occurs first in the practice hall (Dojo) and then after diligent training this awareness can move to the arena of real life. I would propose that our goal is to move through life with that same sense of wonder, awe and exhilaration that you felt on your first solo bicycle ride (for those of you recapturing your youth, your first motorcycle ride). We are inherently designed to follow natural law and when we do, the feeling of freedom is profound.

Naturally, the question is, how then do we increase our awareness and start to understand what is happening around us and to accept that we play an integral part in the whole scene. Fortunately, many of us today live in a part of the world that is relatively peaceful and so becoming more and more aware is not a survival skill necessary for our life path. We have the luxury of time, reflection and meditation that may not have been available to inhabitants of the early tribal and feudal cultures. Many of our predecessors had to learn from a single observation and live or die by the execution of their very next encounter.

What happens after a fight, battle or painful experience? I believe there is a period of reflection where, we observe what has happened and try to make sense of it. We try to understand why the smaller person survived a conflict, a person steady on their feet was able to evade a dangerous situation or an angry out of control person is defeated. We see, if we survive and are aware, the things that may appear counter to our preconceived notion of natural law and ask ourselves, "how can this be".

Making sense of the world is a process of forming concepts. We tell ourselves a story that we think we can understand and we hope it explains what we have seen. Then we put it to the test in some practical way, perhaps responding to a combat situation or perhaps dealing with an angry supervisor at work or an upset customer. The point is this, we must put it to the test in the real world and see the results in a "full on" experience. If we fail to apply our newly forming concept in the real world, we will never really know for sure. Now, don't get me wrong here I am not saying you have to go out and punch or kick or throw drunk Uncle Harold just to prove the effectiveness of your technique (that is what Dojo practice is for). However, we can and should practice the more difficult techniques of mental and emotional control in a quest for balance in real world stressful situations.

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Part 3

Have you ever tried to work with an angry customer? Did you end up yelling back and feeling enraged by the whole experience? How did all that make you feel? How about the last time an inconsiderate driver stimulated your index finger? Have you ever tried simply yielding to the situation?



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No, I am not saying roll over and give in to any form of indignity that they throw your way, but yielding in an appropriate way that generates “right action”. We can respond to a person’s instantaneous burst of anger or aggression by yielding, controlling our breathing, moving out of the direct line of assault and applying motivational energy in the most efficient area. To yield is not to surrender and give in at the drop of a hat, it is to blend with the experience and select right action over automatic, emotional, fear based responses. The use of “right action” yields the best outcome for both parties involved. The angry customer will be dealt with in a calm, assertive, professional way. The big angry guy, who wants to punch your lights out, will not be hurt.

I can tell you all of this but you will have to test it yourself. You can test the application of the concept, first in the Dojo and then the real world to know if it is true for you. If enough people observe a concept to be true, that is to say, we become aware of natural law and can make sense of it, then we have the beginnings of a principle.

Many students of the arts first learn the physical practice of their individual style but the Sensei will often go beyond and teach the technique and the overarching principle. In this way, it engages the students mind along with other aspects of physical development. This is not to say that as students we learn the

principle right away, any more than we learn the physical form right away. It all takes time, practice and patience to move a principle from words that Sensei is saying into the core of who we are, a building block of our personal awareness. Once you own the internal understanding of the principle, you will be able to apply it to many diverse experiences such as a hip throw, a Kata, a public speaking engagement or the loss of a loved one. “Right action” is informed by a true understanding of principles that have been internalized through years of training, reflecting and awareness.

Right action is a spontaneous expression of your true nature, beyond the concern for your own ego. It is the action that comes from balanced emotions, breathing and thinking. Right action allows you to step away from a dangerous situation when appropriate and to step into a dangerous situation when warranted. Only you can make the call, and you bear the responsibility of your own actions. A true warrior has honed his physical, mental and emotional skills so that he can transcend the details of individual style or practice to fully engage Right Action at all times.

“As human beings, our greatness lies not so much in being able to remake the world – that is the myth of the atomic age – as in being able to remake ourselves”

Mohandas Gandhi

I wish each of you all the best on your personal journey through the arts and through life.

Sensei Paul Fox