

A Martial Artist's Mind

By Malele A. Nzeza

The Final Step...

*"It's only when we forget all our learning
that we begin to know."*

-Henry David Thoreau

One day, at a karate class, one of my fellow karate-ka said that our mind was our greatest weapon. I found myself thinking, "if this is true, why does our mind let fear, anger, frustration, and anxiety clog our judgments?" The mind is like a double-edged sword. It can be our greatest ally, but it can also be our worst enemy.

Today, the martial arts are promoted as a way to develop the mind as well as the body. Most martial arts emphasize the development of self-discipline, self-control, increased attention, awareness, and concentration. However, these mental characteristics can be developed in any discipline. In fact, one must possess all these mental attributes to become an accomplished athlete or artist.

As martial artists, we deal with combat and self-preservation. In other words, we deal with life and death situations. Discipline, self-control, increased attention, awareness, and concentration are necessary to acquire the skills we need to defend ourselves against an attack. However, it takes more than these mental attributes to successfully defeat a skilled attacker.

So what are the mental attributes a martial artist needs? I believe there are four: a moving mind, a fearless mind, a spiritual mind, and a mind without ego. These are not easy mental characteristics to acquire. It takes a life of total commitment to the underlined philosophy of our art and a life of never-ending self-examination.

If we consider ourselves martial artists, instead of fighters, then we need to develop these attributes not only at the dojo, but also in every aspect of our lives. After all, life is a battle. It is a battle we fight everyday by confronting and solving problems. Depending on their nature, problems can engender in us feelings of anxiety or anger or anguish or despair or fear or frustration or guilt or grief or loneliness or regret. These are painful feelings, often as painful as any physical pain, even the worst kind of physical pain. In fact, it is because of the pain we experience when we deal with conflicts or events that we call them problems.

"It is through suffering that learning comes."

-Aeschylus

Martial artist's minds are not only the weapons we need to successfully defeat an opponent, but also to solve life's problems. As such, learning to think and act like a martial artist is the final step in the mastery of our art.

A Moving Mind

"Flow with whatever may happen and let your mind be free."

-Chuang Tzu

We live in a dynamic universe. Everything in it is in perpetual motion: from the tiniest particles, that oscillate between quantum states, to the biggest galaxies that travel at the edge of our universe near the speed of light. As a matter of fact, the only things that do not move are usually dead organisms or inanimate objects like rocks. And even those are in a state of transition. The mind is no different. A static mind is a dead mind. It's a mind that doesn't adapt nor evolve nor grow.

Zen teaches that the mind should never set idle. This means that our mind should never stop at anything. This doesn't mean that our mind should jump from one idea to the other like a grasshopper. A moving mind is a mind that, although it's focused on a problem, does not sit on it but actively seeks a solution to it.

As martial artists, having a moving mind is imperative to our survival. Let's say you are confronted with an opponent holding a knife. If your mind stays focused on the knife, you won't be aware of what your attacker is holding in his other hand. As your mind is completely absorbed by the knife, the attacker may pull another weapon from behind his back and strike you with it. Had your mind not stopped at the knife, you would have been able to see what he was doing with his hand and respond to it in an appropriate manner.

It's said that a martial artist must have a mind like the moon, meaning a mind that's clear and can see every movement an opponent makes. He or she must also have a mind like water, meaning that it should be calm and undisturbed by personal thoughts and feelings that could distort his or her judgments.

However, I believe a martial artist must also have a mind like the wind. The wind never settles on anything. It constantly moves from its point of origin to wherever its destination is. Put a barrier across its path and it goes around or over or under it. Place a door in its path and it will force it open. Try to confine it in a container and its pressure will destroy the container. We can't stop or contain the wind and so must be a martial artist's mind.

A moving mind makes us also more adept at solving life's problems. As we saw earlier, confronting and solving problems is a painful process. Because of this painful process, most of us stop short of confronting problems. We procrastinate and hope that the problems will go away. Or, we ignore them or forget them or pretend they don't exist.

We do this because our minds can't move past the pain associated with confronting problems or see the joyful resolution of them.

"When men are ruled by fear, they strive to prevent the very changes that will abate it."

-Alan Paton

So, in order to have a moving mind, we must first conquer our fear of the pain associated with solving problems. In other words, we need...

A Fearless Mind

"A man's doubts and fears are his worst enemies."

-William Wrigley JR.

Anyone who claims to fear nothing is a fool. Fear is a natural emotion designed to protect us from danger. Fear is what keeps us alive in a hazardous world. However, if we don't learn to use fear to our advantage, it can also cripple us. To have a fearless mind doesn't mean to be without fear. It means making decisions and taking actions in spite of our fears. It means taking actions with a full knowledge of what the consequences of these actions may be. It takes courage to have a fearless mind while ignorance to have a foolish mind.

"Our problem is not to be rid of fear but rather to harness and master it."

-Martin Luther King JR.

If you're faced with a skilled fighter, you are more likely to win if you possess a fearless mind. Why? Because you don't let your mind settle on what your opponent can do. Furthermore, when you launch your attack, you must be 100% committed to it. To do this you must step over the bridge, so to speak, and burn it behind you for your attack to succeed. There must be no retreat, although you know that if you fail, you will be at the mercy of your opponent. In other words, you must overcome your fear of the pain your opponent can inflict on you. On the other hand, if your mind stops on what your opponent can do and you wait for him to act, you're more likely to react too late and get hit.

In our lives outside the dojo, it is the same. When confronted by a difficult problem, we have to make a decision to solve it. But most of us fear the consequences of our decisions, so we hesitate and procrastinate. However, we can't wait and hope that the problem will go away or solve itself. Problems don't go away. If we don't solve them they become harder to manage, like an untreated wound that becomes infected.

"All problems become smaller if you don't dodge them, but confront them."

-William F. Hasley

This is something that most of us seem to ignore because to solve a problem we first must take responsibility for it. Whatever the problem we are facing, we should have the courage to face it. And whatever the consequences of our decisions, we should have the strength to endure them.

"To have courage for whatever comes in life – everything lies in that."

Saint Teresa of Avila

However, making a decision is not enough to solve a problem. Once our decision has been made we must be 100% committed to it. In other words, we must step over the bridge and burn it behind us. There is no retreat. Unfortunately, most people make only half-hearted decisions without ever being totally committed to them. Their fear of loss or failure prevents them from committing 100% to their decisions. They use the word "try" as a backdoor. They "try" to make their marriage work, or "try" a new career, or "try" another major in college and so on.

So how do we master our fears and develop a fearless mind? By being totally dedicated to the truth.

"You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

-John 8:32

We all lie, not only to others but also to ourselves. For example, many martial artists never compete. They claim they have no interest in competition. This is fine when it is the real reason. But too often the real reason is their fear. They fear losing or fear being hurt or feel embarrassed. Whatever their fear, they hide it under the guise of lack of interest. Every time someone asks them if they are going to compete at an upcoming tournament, their replies are always the same: they have no interest because competitions are not realistic or they are fixed or they don't like the judging and so on. They not only lie to others about their lack of interest in competition, but also they lie to themselves. The result is that they may never compete, never overcome their fear of competition, and never grow as martial artists. But worst of all, they may convince themselves they are genuinely not interested in competition and clog their minds with falsehood.

"Nothing is easier than self-deceit."

-Demosthenes

We only know the world we live in by our relationship to it, and we relate to it through our five senses; vision, smell, touch, taste, and hearing. These senses allow us to perceive only a small fraction of this world. What appears real often isn't. For example, imagine you walk at night and only the light of the moon allows you to see what's around you. Suddenly, you look up and see a snake hanging from a tree right above you. You panic and scream. A man who happens to pass by hears you scream and rushes to see what happened. He asks you what's wrong. You point your finger up and say, "there is a snake in the tree." The man looks up and says, "this is not a snake, it's just a piece of rope."

This is what life is like. We often experience emotions such as fear, anger, love, anxiety that are based on circumstances that aren't what they appear to be. The only way to come close to reality is to be true to ourselves and to others. The truth is reality and what is false is illusion. In fact, the more clearly we see the reality of the world, the better equipped we are to solve life's problems. Conversely, the less clearly we see the reality of the world - the more our minds are infected by falsehood, misperceptions and illusions – the less able we are to determine the proper course of action and make wise decisions.

But to be dedicated to the truth also means putting our views of reality to the criticism of others. If we don't, we are living in a bubble and continuously feeding our minds with the same delusions. It is the same in the martial arts. If we execute a throw incorrectly and are never corrected, we'll keep on making the same errors without realizing it. We may believe our technique is correct until an instructor points out our mistakes or shows us a more efficient way to perform the throw. Then, when we try the new way of performing the throw, we realize we can do it more easily and efficiently. As a result, what we believed to be true was actually false.

Criticisms are painful, not only because they wound our egos, but also because they cause us to make revisions of our view of reality. As we'll see in the next section, the process of making revisions is difficult and often painful. Why? Because it means "giving up" well-established ideologies, beliefs, patterns of behavior, and sometimes whole life styles. It is because of the pain involved in the process of revising our view of reality that we avoid the challenge of criticisms and its consequences. Therefore, we lie.

"The truth which makes men free is for the most part the truth which men prefer not to hear."

-Herbert Agar

We lie by making a statement we know is false or by making a statement that is not false by itself, but leaves out an important part of the truth. Leaving out an essential part of the truth doesn't make it less of a lie or more excusable. In fact, it can be as destructive as a totally false statement.

"Half the truth if often a great lie."

-Benjamin Franklin

For example, a prosecutor who withholds critical information that would prevent an innocent man from being convicted for a crime he didn't commit is as malicious as a prosecutor who plants false evidence. Because it seems less accountable, the withholding of essential information is the most common form of lying and because it is more difficult to detect and confront, it is often more destructive than making a completely false statement.

We usually justify withholding the truth by saying, "I don't want to hurt people's feelings." But, too often it is to protect our personal needs like a need for power, a need to be liked, or a need to avoid a painful confrontation. However, withholding the truth can be acceptable only when it is genuinely based on the needs of the person or people from whom we withhold the truth, as in the case of children. If we elect to withhold the truth, we must bear in mind that what we are saying is a potential lie and an important moral and ethical decision must be made.

Therefore, to ensure that our view of reality is as correct as it can possibly be, we must be dedicated to the truth and open to the criticism of others. Open people are constantly growing both mentally and spiritually. Because of their openness they establish and maintain stronger intimate relationships than closed people. They have no need to hide. They don't have to make up new lies to cover old ones. They don't waste their efforts covering their tracks or maintaining disguises. Because of their openness, people dedicated to the truth are truly free from fear.

A Spiritual Mind

"The spiritual life does not remove us from the world but lead us deeper into it."

Henri J.N. Nouwen

Let's face it, as martial artists we train our body to become a lethal weapon. To be able to take someone else's life with a strike is a tremendous power. Power corrupts. For example, we see it with some professional athletes who suddenly acquire fame and fortune and abuse this power by acting as if they were above the law.

Spirituality brings depth and wisdom to our martial art and life. It teaches us compassion and respect for life. Furthermore, the martial arts and spirituality are intrinsically linked together. Bodhidharma, who is believed to have created the art from which the martial arts as we know them today derived, is also credited to be the originator of Zen. Zen is about discovering the essence of life. In other words, Zen is about spirituality.

How do we develop a spiritual mind? Well, I believe it takes more than having faith in a religion. For example, if we believe in Christianity, it takes more than going to church every Sunday, knowing every word and punctuation of the bible, and praying every

single day. What it takes is total belief in our faith. And total belief means to follow the path laid by our teacher or mentor.

Many people start training in the martial arts with the desire to earn a black belt. But in order to achieve this goal, they must first believe in their instructor. They must follow the path laid for them by their instructor. Only by going through the same path, doing tens of thousands of kicks, punches, blocks and throws, doing endless repetitions of the same forms, enduring the same pains and sufferings than their instructor, can they earn a black belt.

Spirituality is the same. For instance, if we believe in Christ, then we should follow the path He has laid for us. Christ carried his cross, so we should carry our own cross everyday. And how do we do this? By taking responsibility for our actions.

"If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me."

Mark 16:24

As we saw earlier, we avoid taking responsibility for our actions or behavior because we want to avoid the pain or the consequence of that action or behavior. However, to solve a problem we must first acknowledge that the problem is ours. We can't solve a problem if we say "this is not my problem" and hope that someone else will solve it for us. We can only solve a problem by saying "this is my problem and it's up to me to solve it." But so many people avoid solving their problems by shifting the responsibility to other people or circumstances beyond their control. They use expressions such as "I can't," "I couldn't," "I have to," "I had to," and "How could I?" These expressions show someone who believes he or she has no power of choice, that his or her actions are totally dictated by external forces beyond his or her control. By not taking responsibility, they give up the freedom to choose the way in which they are going to respond and deal with these forces. Ultimately, they give up the freedom to control their destiny.

"The glory of human nature lies in our seeming capacity to exercise conscious control of our own destiny."

-Winston Churchill

But taking responsibility is only the beginning. Again it all comes back to confronting and solving problems. To solve problems we have to make decisions. Making decisions implies choices. Choices imply "giving up" something and "giving up" is, as you have guessed, painful. In fact, it is probably the most painful of human experience. Why? Because to solve a major problem we often have to give up personality traits, ideologies, and even whole life styles. In other words, we must give up a part of who we are. However, this is what is required for us to growth both mentally and spiritually. Much

like a child must give up his or her favorite toys or activities to grow and successfully become an adult.

"The difficulty of life is in the choice."

-George Moore

"Choices are the hinges of destiny."

-Edwin Markham

Despite their differences, all great religions tell us that to understand the essence and reality of life or come closer to God or enter the kingdom of heaven, we must "give up" our attachments to worldly possessions. Therefore, we can say that life is a journey in which we must learn to deny ourselves by giving up the things we love. As children, we must give up our belief in Santa Claus, the tooth fairy, and fairy tales. As we enter adulthood, we must give up our dependency on our parents. As we start a family, we must give up the freedom of non commitment. As we age, we must give up our youthful appearance, agility and health. Throughout our lives we may lose loved ones. Finally, we must give up life itself through death. It is only through the process of giving up that we can grow spiritually and mentally and enjoy the wonderful sense of rebirth that comes with greater maturity.

However, many people are either unwilling or unable to suffer the pain of giving up. Therefore, they hold on, often forever, to their old ways of thinking and behaving and repeat the same patterns throughout their life. They hesitate and procrastinate when faced with a difficult choice. Consequently, they never grow mentally and spiritually. If someone is unwilling to solve a problem by making a decision, if he or she procrastinates and hesitates, then this person is unwilling to grow mentally and spiritually.

"The strongest principle of growth lies in human choice."

-George Eliot

But when faced with a difficult decision, how do we know which is the right choice to make? In order to make the right choice we must have...

A Mind Without Ego

"None so empty as those who are full of themselves."

-Benjamin Whichcote

Ego is usually referred to as our self-image, our self-perception. It includes our personality, value in life and what we think. In my opinion, it's that part of us that makes

us think the world revolves around us. It's that little voice inside us that selfishly says "what about me" when we are faced with a difficult decision. But most importantly, it's that part of us that prevents us from perceiving the essence and reality of life.

"Every religion of the world, no matter what its philosophical view, is founded first and foremost on the precept that we must reduce our selfishness and serve others."

-Dalai Lama

We are all small pieces of a big picture. By focusing our attention on our little "world," we can't grasp the whole picture. It's like looking at a small piece of a mosaic. There is no way we can see the whole picture, much less understand it.

The problem with ego is that it is often confused with pride and self-love. But I believe they are much different. I define ego as the way we feel, think, and act as a result of our self-image or self-perception. While I see pride as the way we feel, think, and act as a result of something (such as a work of art or a performance) we did or someone else did. In other words, ego is when we focus our attention on ourselves and pride is when we focus our attention on something other than ourselves.

For example, if you lose a fight and feel bad even though you competed well, then it's your ego that is bruised. On the other hand, if you are happy about the way you fought, then you have pride in your performance. Conversely, if you win a fight and are happy even though you competed poorly, then again it's your ego. But if you are not overwhelmed with joy because you know you could have done better, then it's pride.

Ego is found in all aspects of our lives. It's found in our view of the human race. We believe we were made in the image of God. For many it means we can do whatever we want with other species because we are "superior". It's found in our views of other ethnic groups. As such, it's the cause of racism and prejudice. It's found in our views of our country. We're "proud" to be American because America "kicks ass". It's found in the martial arts. Our style is always more efficient or complete than another one. It's found in our views of religion. Our religion is the one and only true religion. Within a religion it's found in the different denominations and churches. Our church is always the closest to the original church.

"At the time of our birth, we have neither religion nor ideology nor culture. We acquire or learn about these later in our lives."

-Dalia Lama

We don't directly say that whatever martial art, religion, ethnic group, etc. we belong to is better than others. We use a more subtle approach. We point out the defects in other

martial arts, religions, denominations, countries, ethnic groups, etc. How many times have you said or heard someone say "the problem with this style or group is...." But the real problem is with our own self-centeredness and excessive sense of importance.

The truth is what we believe is always based on our own biases and prejudices. All martial arts have good and bad points. There isn't one superior martial art. They simply use different approaches to achieve the same result. Similarly, no ethnic group is superior to another. Under the skin we all share the same biology. And when it comes to being made in the image of God, I believe that all the things in this world are expressions of God. And if we are Christians, does it really matter to Christ whether we're Baptists or Catholics or Orthodox or etc. OR that we love God with all our hearts? And which religion is the real one? How do we really know? We call it faith but it's mostly based on our culture and upbringing. The fact is all great religions teach the same things: to respect others, achieve a true sense of brotherhood, and love "God" or the Creator.

"For whoever does the will of God is My brother and My sister and My mother."

-Mark 3:35

How do we develop a mind without ego? By possessing genuine humility. To have genuine humility means having true knowledge of ourselves as we are. This means to recognize and accept both the good and bad parts of ourselves equally. It doesn't mean putting more emphasis on the negative part and downplaying the positive part, as many do.

"Too many people overvalue what they are not and undervalue what they are.'

-Malcom Forbes

When we do that - we have an inability to receive compliments or assert ourselves when it's appropriate to do so - we're displaying false humility. As we saw earlier, the truth is reality and falsehood is illusion.

"A humble knowledge of oneself is a surer road to God than a deep searching of the sciences."

Thomas a'kempis

Therefore, to have genuine humility, we must accept ourselves as we truly are. In other words, we must possess self-love. And this is where the confusion between ego and self-love arises. Although the subject of self-love is beyond the scope of this article, I'll attempt to make the distinction between the two. As I pointed out earlier, I refer to ego as the way we feel, think, and act as a result of our self-image or self-perception. On the other hand, to have self-love is to value and love ourselves regardless of how we perceive

ourselves at that moment. Ego is more at the surface whereas self-love is at the core of how we value ourselves. In fact, we should always be able to love and value ourselves, even if we don't feel good about ourselves. Understanding this distinction is to understand that our failure or success at any given moment does not define what we are worth or who we are as a person.

But possessing genuine humility is not enough. We must also live a life of total respect. To respect others means to treat others the way we want to be treated. In order to do that we must first respect ourselves.

"If you want to be respected by others, the great thing is to respect yourself."

-Fyodor Dostoyevski

Once again it all comes back to self-love and valuing ourselves. When we consider ourselves valuable, we take care of ourselves in all the necessary ways. And this is the way we should be with others. For example, if an instructor repeatedly hits his new students hard, he is showing lack of respect toward his students and letting his ego run free. Even if the instructor says he's teaching them how to absorb pain, he knows he wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of these punches or kicks, unless he doesn't value himself.

"If one is cruel to himself, how can we expect him to be compassionate with others?"

-Hasdai Ibn Shaprut

"What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others."

-Confucius

The fact is, to truly respect others we must learn to set our ego aside and literally walk in someone else's shoes. In other words, we must consider our personal needs relatively unimportant.

It takes a tremendous amount of courage to do this. Because when we approach a new object, person, or event, we have the tendency to let our personal biases and prejudices determine what we see, hear, and feel. In other words, when we encounter something unfamiliar we let our past experiences, present needs, and expectations for the future determine what we see, hear, and feel. If we are to truly experience and appreciate the uniqueness of any moments we must first be aware of our preconceived ideas and transcend them in order to see an unfamiliar object, person, or event as it truly is. Without setting our ego aside, each present moment is just a repetition of something we have already seen or experienced.

Regardless of who we are, to walk in someone else's shoes and experience something totally unfamiliar always is and always will be frightening. Therefore, to open ourselves in this manner is truly an act of love. As a result, to possess a mind without ego is to love and respect people and life.

The First Step...

"A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step."

-Lao Tzu

For those who have trained a number of years, acquiring new fighting skills is not really a priority. They already know how to fight and how to take care of themselves if they are faced with an aggressor. For them, the challenge is more to develop their mental skills and apply them to their daily lives. It's not easy because it's a life of continuous and never-ending self-examination.

To me, sparring or kumite is a great metaphor of how we approach life's problems. After all, what is a more urgent problem than facing someone who potentially wants to inflict pain on us? So the first step in developing these mental attributes is to look at what kind of a fighter you are.

"Self-knowledge is the beginning of self-improvement.."

-Baltasar Gracian

Are you someone who takes the initiative by attacking your opponent first or leading your opponent to make a mistake? Or are you someone who waits to see what your opponent will do? Are you someone who is 100% committed to your attack or counter? Or do you hold back? Are you one of those who blames the judges or your lack of rest or your upset stomach for losing a fight? Or do you take responsibility for your defeat? Do you need to intimidate your opponent by hitting them hard? Or do you like to fight without hurting your opponent? Are you someone who talks about your success

constantly? Or are you someone who talks about other people's success? By looking at yourself honestly, you will know what kind of fighter you are and which of these four mental attributes you have to develop and improve.

"It is wisdom to know others; It is enlightenment to know one's self."

-Lao Tzu

Life is a battle and our opponent is time. It's a fair fighter that will forgive our mistakes. As in kumite it doesn't matter how many times we fall down - as long as we get back on our feet, the fight is never lost. But also as in kumite, there is one mistake time won't forgive. It's hesitation or procrastination. If we hesitate or procrastinate, time will eventually inflict upon us a fatal blow.

*"When you see a rattlesnake poised to strike,
you do not wait until he has struck before you
crush him."*

-Franklin Delano Roosevelt

*"He who postpones the hour of living is like the
rustic who waits for the river to run out before
he crosses."*

-Horace

We fight the battle of life by solving problems. And we solve problems by making decisions. By developing a moving and fearless mind we can make quick and committed decisions. By developing a spiritual mind and a mind without ego we can make decisions that are the best for us, but, above all, best for others.

We often think of masters as individuals who can achieve almost impossible physical feats. They can knock you out with a single "glance," or they can leap into the air over 7-foot tall people and throw half a dozen kicks before touching the floor. Yet, it's my opinion that if this is true then any 10 years old who can do a 540 degree jump spinning kick could be considered a master. To me, masters of martial arts are masters of life. They are not superstars or movie stars. To the world they may seem quite ordinary. But when we look closer, we see that these are highly spiritual people. As such, they are extraordinarily loving individuals who possess great compassion and great powers. Although they exercise these powers in quiet and even hidden ways, we can see the results in the lives of those they touch.

*"The greatest truths are the simplest,
and so are the greatest men."*

-J.C. Hare

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www.suncoastkarate.com
dojo@suncoastkarate.com