



WESTERN MARTIAL ARTS

FACING FEARS NOTES

“Facing fears is the difference between martial arts practice and a hobby”

We do not have a lot of information about the traditions and logistics of how martial arts were taught in the west. We do know that there were schools and organizers and groups that gathered together to practice. We do know that at one time the relationship between mind, body and spirit was very close and more integrated. At some point religion (spirit) and science (mind) diverged, and physical endeavours (body) were no longer held with the same esteem.

Nevertheless the martial texts of HEMA sometimes refer to character values connected to training. We do know that character mattered in this cultural period.

Asian traditions often address the importance of character in martial arts training. For example:

“Those who would practice karate without the moral integrity to support it are not true karateka (practitioners of karate)”

How did they incorporate character development into the martial arts? In my own training, practice had a sense of seriousness and “deadly intent” about it. From the moment we entered the dojo until we left at the end, practice was about facing yourself, staying aware, and facing fears.

When I started training I just did what the teachers said. Over time I began to see reasons behind some of the disciplined aspects of practice. I began to see that the entire structure of the practice was about facing fears.

Here are some ideas that we can borrow as we try to build martial context in HEMA:

- Have a distinct beginning and ending for everything
- From the moment you enter the practice place you are practicing. There should be a boundary between the sacred space of the inside of the practice place and the rest of the world. Even in the absence of a physical hall to practice in, you can still make a distinction between practice and the rest of your concerns.

- At the beginning of practice, settle yourself by meditating. Finish practice by meditating.
- Begin and end basic drills clearly as well.
- When sparring, the salute and handshaking before and after you face an opponent draws a dividing line between your partner as opponent and you partner as colleague.
- Maintain a martial awareness and do not talk.
- Intellectualize about techniques at times when you are free to ponder, not when you are expected to listen or act. Over thinking can be very dangerous in realistic circumstances.
- Do not “mansplain” or “femsplain” or make side issues that distract you. Doing so pulls you away from the optimum mindset for facing fear.
- The optimum mindset is to practice with deadly intent. That means to take each thing that you do whether its solo basics, paired practice or sparring with seriousness. Endeavour to maintain a serious demeanour at all times, even when someone else is distracted.

Having distinct boundaries and training seriously trains clarity and discipline. By clarity, I mean that you endeavour to focus on the task at hand by eliminating what are distractions to training.

In this way you are already preparing yourself to face your fears.

MEDITATION

At the beginning of practice the goal of meditation is to clear yourself of other concerns and anxieties and to quiet your mind.

This meditation is focused on breathing. Breath in through the nose and out through the mouth and concentrate on your breathing. Quiet the upper body, relax your shoulders and feel your core as you extend your spine both up and down. Breath in by expanding your abdomen as you inhale through the nose then breath out through your mouth controlling your exhalation in the back of your throat.

Think of a circle defining the state of action in the breathing cycle. Imagine tracing the circle with your finger. When inhaling your finger is rising. When exhaling it is lowering. This image will emphasize that the line between inhalation and exhalation is soft and continuous.

Different kinds of meditation do different things: These may require you to focus on breath, to focus on what you may be thinking about, to focus on the environment and the breathing pattern may take on wildly different forms.

WARMUPS

The warmup is for preparation. All the while with a serious demeanour focus on posture and bio-mechanical correctness. Move at the edge of what you are able to do in both overall flexibility, through your range of motion under a load and include short duration high intensity strength and stamina practices.

I use warmups to focus on general biomechanics and on fitness but also to ready people to be in the right mindset. Consequently I require people to stay aware and to try to copy me exactly and I ask them to refrain from speaking.

Breathing practices can be used to improve recovery and prevent becoming gassed. I use three part breathing to recover from a hard workout. I use “dog breathing” to quickly flush CO2 and diminish the sensation of being gassed when under pressure.

The biochemistry and psychology of posture.

How you present yourself affects both your internal biochemistry and how people perceive you. If you extend your spine up and down, and keep your shoulders down and head up then you will feel powerful and you will be seen that way by your opponents. If you hunch your shoulders and look at the ground you will look weak. Use warmups as a way to hone and study the effects of posture on your emotional content.

Mind, Body, and Spirit are different aspects of the same being. It is therefore no surprise that there are physical and biochemical connections for mindset and emotion. Not only is your posture connected to your emotional content and tenacity, it can conversely be manipulated to help you in challenging times. In addition, we are quite capable of reading the mind of an opponent through subtle cues in posture and facial features. This also can be used as a way of manipulating the opponent.

BASICS

Austerity of repetition is useful in focusing the mind. Do not drink or rest during practice. Endeavour to stay aware. When doing basics imagine an opponent and maintain deadly intent. If you do each technique with this intensity and you use repetitions to build challenge then a basics practice begins to feel more real.

TRY THIS:

500 to 1000 sword strokes each one done intensely. Avoid suffering any lapse in your sense of “deadly intent”. Do not falter in your awareness from the beginning to the end.

Use three part breathing to recover. Three part breathing reminds you to breath deeply to quickly flush your body of CO2. It also causes you to recover emotionally from a trial.

Note: Consider doing your own repetitive practice as a feat. For example do 1000 sword strokes on a pell for one month, each one done with deadly intent.

FEAR AND LIMITS

During a hard repetitive workout, people often worry about hurting themselves or whether they are overdoing things, or they become inexplicably angry and the teacher or they feel fear of being not good enough. This is an opportunity to face these fears and to face yourself. Such fears become mental blocks which prevent you from finding your strength. My teacher Mr. Ohshima would say, "you must find your mental blocks and polish them away." He would add that "we are experts at babying ourselves"

FEAR AND ANGER. FEAR AND SELF LOATHING.

When you get angry, it is almost always associated with fear. When people come to practice and we begin to introduce them to austere practices they will react either by turning inwards and feeling frozen or by becoming angry and striking out. These are both manifestations of deep fear. Practicing intensely tends to help you to find balance as you face each fear, each mental block that holds you. The balanced state encourages awareness.

When I say push yourself, I do not mean to destroy yourself. I mean to find what you perceive to be the edge of your ability and capacity and to test your preconceived notions about your limitations.

You can destroy yourself in a fit of self loathing or by refusing to consciously rest or heal. These are also, ultimately, signs not of strength but of fear.

SPARRING

SQUARE BREATHING

Breath work is a means of connecting to your unconscious. Many breathing techniques encourage you to calm your conscious mind in one way or another. In martial arts meditation has pragmatic purpose. One purpose for meditation is to prepare yourself for a trial. Square breathing is one method of doing this.

Prior to sparring try square breathing. Breath in for 4 to 8 seconds. Hold your breath for the same time interval. Breath out in the same time and then hold one the exhalation for your chosen interval before inhaling again. This seems to create a steady emotional state that is neither unconscious or too restless.

ONE ATTACK WITH FIST AND SWORD

One attack is a form of designated sparring. This means that I designate which sort of attack and the target for that attack.

There are realistic aspects to this practice but there are also unrealistic parts. All sparring practices are like this. People sometimes argue about the efficacy of one sparring approach over the others.

But we have various sparring methods that we overlap to capture differing aspects of realistic fighting. Combining these together helps to practice for reality safely. Uncontrolled full contact sparring used in this context becomes just one type of practice among several.

So the realistic part of this sparring is that you are actually trying to hit your opponent with an uncontrolled and dangerous attack. The timing is free, meaning that the attacker chooses when to attack. Footwork is constrained meaning that the opponents do not move once they have set their positions. All of this limits uncertainty about the nature of the attack which allows the attack to be earnest.

Limiting the uncertainty of the attack is not realistic but this is the constraint for this type of sparring.

The defender is free to block and to counterattack in any way that they choose with the caveat that they must completely control their counterattack. They can opt to simultaneously block and attack or they can pre-empt the attack by attacking just as the attacker decides to go. The only unrealistic aspect for the defender is to control the counter.

If the defender does their job correctly they will find a “true place” of timing and positioning such that they are able to strike while the attacker has no defence. So we limit the counterattack to prevent wear and tear on our partners.

EMPTY HANDS OR WEAPONS

There is a difference between doing this with empty hands and no armour versus using swords and masks. In the empty hand version it is actually a lot easier to hit hard and perhaps hurt your opponent. It is part of the practice that there is a cost of failure. A real cost of failure is important in this practice and should not be eliminated. With protective gear in place during weapons practice, building the appropriate seriousness and intensity can be hard. It is easier for people to joke around and play lightly.

For this reason we do both empty handed and weapons forms of this practice. Doing this without a weapon helps us to find the intensity of deadly intent. When students have figured out what this might feel like, we start using swords.

CONSIDERATION OF AFTERBLOWS CAN BE ADDED

In the final version of one attack with swords, we allow the attacker to defend against the counter if possible. So the attacker must attack in such a way that they are protected from the counter. The defender at this stage is also trying to hit on the counter because everyone is armoured and it is a realistic possibility to be struck by a afterblow.

INTIMIDATION AND THE EYES

It is said by the sages that “the eyes are the mirror of the mind”. Many fighting systems do not emphasize the eyes and yet the eyes are a primal threat posture and we often are uncomfortable with eye contact. Studying the eyes, faces this fear and then allows you to learn to use eye contact to your advantage. You do not need eye contact to drive intensity and deadly intent however.

REAL OR NATURAL FEARS VERSUS IMAGINARY OR UNNATURAL FEARS.

My teacher would also talk about real versus imaginary fears. Real fear, also called Natural fear is about standing in front of real danger. This feeling is very intense and feels like exaggerated caution. For example, you might feel real fear standing on the edge of a cliff particularly if the edge is uneven or covered with stones or slippery snow. Real fear results in a quickening and it induces action.

Imaginary fear also called Irrational or Unnatural fear. This sort of fear is not based in reality. It includes neurotic fears that people can have, such as an irrational fear of spiders. Irrational fear can be the result of your back story. Irrational fears are very often the source of mental blocks. Facing irrational fears is an aspect of facing yourself and doing so results in clarity.

Where rational fears mobilize you into action, irrational fears disable you, slow you down and debilitate you from taking care of yourself.

Interestingly, fears, even unnatural fears can actually be useful. Real fear provides you with sensitivity that can be utilized almost like a form of ESP. Unnatural fear is often a

guidepost to your deeper self. When you find the source of your unnatural fear, the source of darkness in your life, it is often connected to your gift. By embracing your darkness you give yourself permission to use your gifts, to claim the good as you embrace your darkness.

This leads to humility and to benevolence. You become truly humble because you know that you can be a monster even as you may be a knight. You become benevolent because you can see yourself in the failings of others. This allows you to forgive them and to be kind.

FEAR, TIMING AND DISTANCE

The measure is a function of both timing and distance. The Japanese word for measure is “ma-ai”. It means timing and distance combined. the Ma-ai is more than a physical assessment of range. It is also intensely psycho-dynamic and is a manifestation of real fear. When you start facing dangerous opponents, you will notice that sometimes the sensation of being too close wells up in a very palpable way. You may be forced back onto your heels by your opponent’s proximity and their baleful stare. It is clear that this is innate and that we all have this skill of sensing danger. What is not clear to most people is that this sort of fear is a tool that can be used in martial arts. Utilizing this sensation is a skill that can be practiced.

Someone with a high level of skill will be very good at sensing the measure. When one person can sense the ma-ai with a high degree of precision and a beginner can only coarsely sense the ma-ai, the person with higher sensitivity will have a huge advantage. It almost does not matter how powerful their technique is if they understand the measure.

THE IMPORTANT PART

The important part of this practice is to have deadly intent. When intensity and deadly intent exist in one attack, the practice becomes a laboratory for facing your fears. For example the first psychological dilemma of one attack might be about actually getting hit. The second dilemma is about actually hitting someone. Other fear will come up in this practice. Do not avoid looking at them. Polish your spirit by removing mental blocks.

End of part one. Part two is an example of an austere practice that is used in special training. A training event that focuses on facing fears.

HORSE STANCE

The practice is simple. Stand in a horse stance for a prescribed period of time. This seems easy but is in fact very challenging. The challenge is not about the physical difficulty. It is about facing yourself. It is about examining what happens when you are faced with hardship.

Because of the internal nature of this challenge how well you perform the stance is actually immaterial. Comparisons are useless. The person who is having the greatest physical difficulty may be wrestling with something that is far more scary than anything you might be facing. You cannot and should not compare. Instead look only to your own practice.

It is hard to describe such things. Doing so trivializes the depth of the experience. Its like trying to describe what happens when you hit the wall in a marathon.

Note: Our cynical world does not understand such a practice. Perhaps the time is right to offer it again.

ADDITIONAL SOURCES AND FUTURE TOPICS

FEAR AND THE CON ARTIST (THE GIFT OF FEAR BY GAVIN DE BECKER)

How fear is used by predators.

FEAR AND THE ENVIRONMENT (VIM HOFF)

Waterboarding, Facing the cold
Deep breathing

FEAR AND THE TRIBE (RORY MILLER)

The relationship between fear and the other. Fear of being outcast.

Trust Fall and the power of the group.

FEAR AND GENDER (THE ARMoured ROSE)

VICTIM AS A LIFESTYLE. (ROLLO MAY, VICTOR FRANKL)

Focusing on these things is fear based.

DON'T BE A VICTIM. DON'T FOCUS ON OTHERS.
FOCUS ON YOURSELF. FACE YOUR FEAR. FACE
YOURSELF.