

The Black Belt Book of Life - Topic #4

Balance is Primary

Of all life's skills
with which to carry,
remember this . . .
Balance is Primary!

*Anyone can teeter-totter
but not everyone can balance.*

Anonymous

*Man always travels along precipices.
His truest obligation is to keep his balance.*

Pope John Paul II

*The best and safest thing is to keep a balance in your life,
acknowledge the great powers around us and in us.
If you can do that, and live that way,
you are really a wise man.*

Euripides

[480-406BC]

Arguably, the greatest of life's skills is balance. With it, life is potentially harmonious, productive, meaningful. Without it, life is extremely challenging, bringing a torrent of angst, confusion, destruction, non-productivity and unhappiness. When the teeter-totter is constantly going up and down, how can stability be maintained? It can't, and where there is no stability, there is, axiomatically, instability and all of its attending issues and problems.

The principle of balance is echoed in Aristotle's *Golden Mean*, the desirable midpoint between two extremes. Although less clear in its understanding, Confucius expounded what he called *The Doctrine of the Mean*. Both of these timeless philosophers lived three hundred and two hundred years BC, Aristotle predating Confucius by approximately one hundred years.

Yet, their message rings true throughout time: balance is primary and without balance the hope for a productive, fulfilling and meaningful life is compromised, if not totally negated.

Although the physical aspect of balance is readily apparent in martial arts training, it is no less critical to develop emotional, psychological and spiritual balance as well. If any one of these facets is missing in our character make-up, there will be a chink in our armor potentially creating problems for us in life. Therefore, it is vitally important that we constantly work to achieve a state of balance in all things.

It is not easy to achieve balance. Try standing on one leg for any length of time. It's difficult. Stand on an inflated rubber dome, disk or gymnastics balance beam and the task becomes even more difficult. Still need more challenge? Try these balance exercises with your eyes closed. As time in the balance position increases, the challenge becomes practically overwhelming, resulting in falling off the mark. If standing on one foot is not challenging enough, try a handstand on the ground. Then proceed to parallel bars, gymnastic rings or the balance beam again. Hardly an easy skill. Even the best gymnast cannot hold his balance point for more than a few minutes on any given apparatus.

It is through these exercises that we understand balance is a dynamic and active process, not a passive one. Our mind, muscles, tendons, ligaments and joints are all continually moving to keep us centered. We learn from such exercises that balance is truly a difficult state to maintain, not just in a physical sense, but also in a mental, emotional and spiritual sense as well. Thus, leading a successful life becomes a continual struggle and is definitely not a passive activity but an energetic and constantly dynamic one.

One of the main ingredients of balance is concentration, a focus of our attention on the alignments that keep all of our body parts in sync in the physical realm. When standing on one foot, for example, the key to balance is to insure that our head, shoulders, hips, supporting knee, ankle, foot and our body's center line are properly aligned. Thus, balance becomes a problem of alignment. To simply try and balance on one foot doesn't do us much good because there's no concrete understanding of what creates balance. But when we focus on the alignment of the parts responsible for the balance, the probability of success increases dramatically.

It is no different when we are working to keep our life in balance except that we have to expand our focus to include our mind, heart, spirit, health, finances, relationships, etc. - all aspects that are necessary to life and which, if in the proper alignment, help insure a successful life through the principle of balance. Once we lose our focus, our alignment goes and so our balance goes and with it the peace that would be generated from a life of equanimity.

It is difficult to maintain balance in this world because it is based on a bipolar structure - the interplay of opposites. The ancient Yin/Yang symbol of the Chinese Tao beautifully depicts this ebb and flow of opposite energies: positive/negative; light/dark; male/female; hard/soft; day/night; up/down; hot/cold; happy/sad; good/bad and so forth. In this world the great cosmic pendulum is forever swinging back and forth from one polarity to the other and in such a constantly changing environment it is difficult to maintain balance, which is why mystics call this earth the "plane of struggle," and why martial arts practice focuses on teaching and learning the virtue of balance. And what is the key to balance? Concentration.

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