

The Black Belt Book of Life - Topic #5 - Concentration is the First Key

Balance is Primary.
This we see,
but in the struggle of life
Concentration Is The
very *First Key*.

Concentration is the secret of strength.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Balance is primary, no doubt. However, concentration is the first key to success in whatever we do. If we can't focus our attention directly on the task at hand, there is a pronounced risk of not succeeding at all and more poignantly, a lethal risk if confronted with a life-threatening situation.

The combat aspect of martial arts training teaches us the critical reason for having total concentration. Even in a light sparring exercise we could get severely injured if we lose our concentration for a fraction of a second. Why? Because fighting happens in a fraction of a second. For example, a well-trained attacking hand can move much faster than the human eye can see, let alone the mind perceive, assimilate, and deliver a counter strike or move. People do make mistakes in sparring no matter how controlled the format. A wrong move, an unblocked kick or hand strike, a poorly chosen angle of attack or defense or miscalculated timing can get one hurt. And this is in a controlled environment. The consequences of losing one's focus in a real situation runs the scale from injury to fatality . . . of ourselves or someone we're attempting to protect.

True story. As a case in point, one of the greatest and most gifted athletes in Kiado-Ryu history was competing in kumite [fighting] at a national tournament. The things this gentleman could do athletically were off the scale of normal athleticism. Yet, he lost his very first fight in that tournament. When I asked him, in astonishment, what happened in the fight his exact and profound words were, "I blinked." That's the reality of fighting and of life and death. Had this great athlete not blinked, not lost his concentration for an eye-blink of time, the outcome of that fight may have been much different. But it wasn't. This simple example underscores the importance of why *concentration is the first key*.

Developing this life-giving and life-saving skill of concentration is a great benefit of martial arts training because in sparring drills we learn to never lose our concentration, to remain constantly focused on our opponent, our objective. Even if we're totally concentrated on the task at hand, there is no guarantee we'll be successful, but if we lose our concentration, there's a very high level of probability we'll fail.

This same lesson of concentration applies also to kata - the performance of choreographed martial arts routines. It can also be applied to any performance activity, especially live performances such as singing, acting or public speaking. It's one thing to practice a routine alone in a studio, home, office, shower, the backyard, etc., but when competing in a tournament or performing on stage before a live audience or in front of a camera, losing one's concentration can be deleterious to the successful accomplishment of the task at hand. Total success demands total concentration.

Fighting or performing are obvious examples of activities in which concentration is critical, but it is no less critical in life, and a lack of proper concentration can be just as deadly. For example, assume you're perched on a cliff on one side of a thousand foot high crevasse that is a hundred feet across. Spanning this fissure is a four inch wide beam upon which you must walk to get to the other side. If you fall from this height, death is certain. You start to walk, knowing that if you make one mistake it will be your last. This is important to remember because we often think that life gives us second chances. Wrong. Life doesn't always give second chances and there are certainly no guarantees that it does. Therefore, we must be focused . . . always.

So you start walking across this four inch beam in an attempt to get to the other side. Do you dance on the beam? No. Do you make sudden moves? No. Do you jump up and down for joy? No. Do you turn around to see how far you've come? No. Do you become overwhelmed with emotional grief or ecstatic exuberance at any point in this hundred foot live-or-die scenario? You'd better not. In fact, the only thing you'd better do is keep your concentration - visually, physically, mentally, emotionally - if you want not to die. At no point while walking on this four inch beam spanning a thousand foot high, one hundred foot wide crevasse can you afford to lose your concentration. By keeping your focus you have a better chance of keeping your balance [remember, balance is primary] and become successful in your quest to get to the other side of the fissure. Lose your concentration and you die. It's as simple as that.

This is, of course, a severe example. Or is it? In life we don't traverse thousand foot high and hundred foot wide crevasses on a four inch beam, or do we? Do you drink and drive? If so, you're on this life-or-death beam. Do you drive under the influence of any mind-altering or mind-inhibiting drug? If so, you're on the beam. Do you indulge in risky sexual behavior? If so, you too are on the beam. This last question was never more tragically significant than the man who said on a primetime television talk show regarding his desire to have sex, which he had never had and through which he acquired AIDS, "I was dying to have

sex, and now I'm dying because I had sex, once!" What he lost before he lost his life was his concentration on choices he should have made for his life's well-being and safety.

This example is severe, of course. Still, it underscores the need for concentration in everything we do - in our relationships, our careers, our meditations, our every day-to-day actions inside and out of the martial arts classroom. Without a doubt, if we want to be successful in anything or be kept from experiencing heartache and misery, we must remember that *concentration is the first key*.

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