

The Fundamental Mindset of A Traditional Martial Artist

~ In and Out of the Dojo ~

Introduction

I have trained in the traditional Japanese martial arts of Chito-Ryu style Karate and Jiu-Jitsu, with a healthy dose of Chinese Kung-Fu (multiple styles) and Tai-Chi just for good measure, for a long enough time to learn there is much more to traditional martial arts than offensive or defensive techniques. While, certainly, these techniques are considered fundamental they aren't what makes a martial artist, for martial arts is exactly what the name implies: a martial art or an artform derived from defence and offence.

Just as a painter may have a brush, easel, paints and canvas it does not make what he does art, it simply makes him equipped. The painter may be able to mark the canvas with a stroke, he may be able to apply colour according to a learned pallet of colour, strokes, and details enough to fool the casual onlooker but to someone who truly appreciates art, they can tell whether or not the painter was in the proper mindset to paint, or was he just performing a task.



"The Painter", Zoro Mettini, 2001

The same goes for martial **arts**. In the beginning, you learn the technique, but until you begin to think like a martial **artist**, act like a martial **artist**, and feel like a martial **artist** you are nothing more than well equipped enough to activate the movements; yet to feel the movements and know the movements you need more. You need the fundamental mindset of a traditional martial **artist**.

I'm not perfect, but are any of us... That isn't some sort of excuse, it is more of a truth. Using the painter analogy again; are any strokes perfect? Does the painter just add colour to fill in the gaps, does he feel his painting when not standing in front of a canvas? Ask any painter; ask any martial artist: You'll get the same response, a real artist looks at the world with feeling, feeling the shapes and the colours, feeling the smells and sensations around him, this feeling comes out in his practice. We are human, we all have emotions; as long as we make an effort to remember that we are artists with or without a canvas, inside or outside a dojo, during training or during a drive to work; we will remain artists.

"In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, in the expert's mind there are few" ~ Shunryu Suzuki, Sōtō Zen Monk

When we were children we knew nothing. When we learned something new; we felt the possibilities were endless and to be honest, at that point they were. We knew no limitations, it wasn't until we were told limitations existed or we learned there were limitations through trial and error that we placed limits on the things we did.

We approached everything with enthusiasm, and openness and eagerness to learn something new, a desire to fill a void. When we finally learned it we were overcome with the elation of satisfaction. The beginner's mind is always open, eager, and above all else optimistic... Shoshin.



Shoshin

初心

The Beginner's Mind

Shoshin is a word with its roots in traditional Zen Buddhism and translates into "Beginner's Mind", looking at all situations; even those encountered before, as a beginner would look at it, with endless possibilities.

In the dojo: You should assume Shoshin with every technique. This isn't to say you haven't performed the technique before, but you should realize that the result of your technique is not necessarily the only result, realize there are possibilities that you do not yet understand. Using the mindset of Shoshin allows you to expect the unexpected, with no preconceived notion of any outcome, to be ready for what you cannot foresee.

In the workplace: Be eager to perform a job you hate, approach it with a lack of preconceptions. It is these preconceptions that give you that feeling of dread when you feel you know the inevitable job is going to result in negative feelings or outcomes. Be optimistic, the cloud is simply a cloud; the colour of it's lining is determined by your mindset.

In life: Look at everything with a fresh set of eyes. We have all puzzled over an issue, sometimes for hours and how many times have we heard the phrase "sleep on it" or "look at it in the morning with fresh eyes." – Shoshin, fresh eyes.

Let go of what you know, your thoughts, biases, and experiences and open up to learning a new approach with enthusiasm... Shoshin.

"When your temper rises, lower your fists. When your fists rise, lower your temper." ~ Chojun Miyagi, founder of Gojo Ryu Karate

Perhaps one of the most difficult of the traditional mindsets to master, while we may think we have mastered it, the lack of it can rear its head in many ways. To truly master Mushin is considered, my many, the pinnacle of the martial mindsets.

Have you ever been so focused on a task at work, or in the dojo that time seems to just stand still? Your hands and your feet seem to move without thought, they know the path – you're "in the zone". This is Mushin, or as the Chinese call it Wuxin, either way, it has the same meaning.

The image shows two large, bold, black calligraphic Japanese characters stacked vertically. The top character is '無' (mu) and the bottom character is '心' (shin), together forming the word '無心' (Mushin). The style is expressive and fluid, with varying line thickness and some overlapping strokes.

Mushin

無心

Without Mind

Let go of your emotions; fear, anger, hatred, happiness, and certainly ego. You exist right now, in this time and in this place – nothing you have done before entering matters, nothing you will do after leaving matters. What matters is now, this moment. Placing yourself at the moment will tune your mind and body to react to this moment, and not halter on a moment that has already passed.

So, you've taken a hit and you're angry!? Your focus has turned from the moment to a moment that has already passed, your anger has pulled you away from the present – it has held you back.

You've scored a fantastic strike, or someone has complimented your technique! Certainly, feel good about yourself for a moment and then let it go, or again – you are living in the past, not paying attention to the present what all that matters – is this moment.

In the dojo: Practice Mokuso before you begin training, clear your mind and let go of everything that happened to you during the day at work or school; it doesn't matter now, right now is what matters ... right now you may take a strike to the ribs, not 10 minutes ago, not 5 seconds ago; be concerned about what is happening now because the past is over.

Mushin is practiced in the dojo and should also be practiced in the workplace or at school, and in your everyday life. Certainly, our past teaches us, but it is the present that defines us. Fear, regret, anger, and ego serve no purpose but to distract us. Let go of everything – go with the flow ... Mushin.

"No fear, no surprise, no hesitation, no doubt." ~ Miyamoto Musashi, Japanese Swordsman and Ronin

Place yourself into this situation: All hell is breaking loose and you are in the middle of it. You have a choice... you can run helter-skelter in a random direction with the rest of the herd, or you can face the obstacle head-on, with integrity and calming resolve – this is Fudōshin.

This state is complete control over yourself, your physical and mental status in the face of stress. The ability to maintain control allows you to react with calm, and precision.

For the older generation, think for a moment of "The Fonz"; a zen Buddhist, so-to-speak, in so many ways. When there was a problem the character was calm in the face of chaos, and with a snap of his fingers and his characteristic, "Eh!" the problem would be solved.

Another analogy perhaps? Let's consider the image of the old monk sitting on a stone in the middle of a horrible storm. He does not waiver, he continues his meditation.

In the dojo: Be calm and don't let your emotions get the better of you. It is far too easy to get fired up, it is even easier to let it take control of you. Well, this sounds almost like Mushin; almost, but not quite. The Mushin mindset teaches you not to live in the past, the Fudōshin mindset teaches you to remain calm and present at the moment. A calm mind is an immovable mind.

In the workplace: You may work in a high-stress environment, perhaps you're in customer service or working behind a desk, perhaps in an emergency room and working with life-threatening situations. Regardless of your work, Fudōshin is the calm in the storm.

Quite literally, named after the Bodhisattva (any person who is on the path of Buddhism), Fudomyo (Chinese, Būdòng Míngwǎng). He is often pictured sitting with an angry face, a sword in one hand to cut through ignorance and deceit, and a rope in the other hand to bind truth together. The face, while most feel it is angry represents his immovability toward the flame surrounding him, his focus and desire to remain calm in the face of imminent danger and to do the right thing... Fudōshin.

不動心

Fudōshin

不動心

Immovable Mind

"The ultimate aim of the art of Karate lies not in victory or defeat, but the perfection of the character of its participants." ~ Master Gichin Funakoshi

Zanshin can best be described as the act of living in alertness to whether the goal has already been achieved. This is a wonderful mindset, but only half of it and this should be the latter half. The first half of Zanshin should be aware and open at all times, not only awareness and openness of the end. Ultimately, is there an end at all?



Zanshin

残心

Remaining Mind

Not to be overlooked, Zanshin may be mentioned last in this text but certainly should not be considered least. Zanshin is all that remains after a technique is performed, the relaxed state of the mind and body, letting go of any previous states, letting the stress of battle fade away.

In the dojo: Practice Zanshin during a sparring match; you have scored a wonderfully placed strike and won the match, but instead of jumping around and cheering for yourself, practice Zanshin. Return to a relaxed state so you are ready for another attack. You must have this moment of Zanshin to direct and reflect on what was successful and what was not, and prepare yourself for another attack or technique.

In the workplace: Practicing Zanshin allows you to be aware of those around you, and your own emotions. When someone is upsetting you, understand you are being upset (then practice Mushin), don't allow it to drag you down. At the end, when it has either been completed or perhaps even failed, practice Zanshin to remain calm physically, mentally, and emotionally to reflect on the previous situation.

True Zanshin is constant awareness, and while this can be mentally and physically demanding, Mushin allows you to remain aware of only what is present, only what is current. Therefore, you see; Zanshin and Mushin exist almost on a level playing field and work in harmony together – Zanshin allows you to relax and reflect while Mushin allows you to stay in the present... Zanshin.

初心 無心 不動心 殘心

Wait! There are more... but this document has gone on long enough for now. Perhaps there will be more in the future but for now, let us take a moment of Zanshin and reflect on what we've covered so far...

Shoshin: The beginner's mind, approach your training and life with a clear mind, a mind that is enthusiastic and ready to learn something new, even if you've done it before.

Mushin: "In the zone", a mind focused on a task, a mind not living in the past but in the present. Mushin lets the body do what the body has been trained to and doesn't concern itself with what it has already done.

Fudōshin: The immovable, the unshaken, the determined mind. Be not affected by things around you unless they concern the task at hand, see the truth and the path to the end will show itself.

Zanshin: All that remains is to be aware of all that remains, all that was there before and all that will be thereafter. We do not dwell on it, but we are aware of it.

What you think you hear, what you think you know, and what you think you believe is exactly what holds you back from hearing, knowing, and believing.



Many thanks to the internet, the many sources, and the many inspirations for this written work. While every attempt has been made to keep it original, quotations and cites have been made as necessary otherwise. As I am a great believer in sharing knowledge, please feel free to use any piece of this work without hesitation.