



Mushin and Zanshin

As everyone knows, controlling one's own mind is among the most difficult and challenging of all human endeavors. We might say this is because our mental computer lacks a keyboard for direct control and programming; we may know what we want our mind to do, but often we just can't find the control mechanism. There are no handy buttons to push.

Zen is one approach to this problem. Utilizing meditation as a way of studying the operation of the mind, Zen monks for centuries have researched the problem of exerting conscious control over mental processes. The techniques they have developed, though difficult to master, *do work* (and have nothing really to do with religious beliefs, at least in martial arts applications). These techniques often utilize symbolic visualization as the "handle" for thought control. It is admittedly a sort of bootstrap method, but it gets the job done.

Mushin and *Zanshin* are two of these Zen-related concepts, important not just in the practice of karate, but in all of the martial arts. Anyone who seeks to become a truly formidable fighter, armed or unarmed, must master them; but doing so is not easy.

The literal translation of *mushin* is "no mind," or "mindless," which to a Westerner sounds like the definition of an ignoramus. But the true meaning does not imply being empty of knowledge or empty of skill; quite the contrary. It refers to being profoundly

empty of distractions, preoccupations, worries, conscious planning and all other trains of thought when preparing to engage in a fight. This frees up the maximum number of brain neurons to hold ready for instant calculations of action when the critical moment arrives. The idea is to stop your mind from thinking about *anything* as you go into battle, all the while remaining acutely alert to, and focused on, your opponent. Your punches, kicks and blocks then come automatically.



mu
(no)

shin
(mind)

Mushin is similar (or perhaps even identical) to another Oriental metaphorical expression: *mizo no kokoro*, or “mind like water.” This refers to quieting one’s mind to the point that it resembles a still pond of water without a single ripple or wave of distracting mental activity. In this state, the surface of the water reflects a clear and perfectly undistorted image of the surroundings, like a mirror.

Similarly, the expression *tsuki no kokoro*, “mind like the moon,” describes an acute state of non-analytical alertness or global awareness wherein the mind observes every detail, just as the moon shines on everything without prejudice or preference, and remains unaffected by what it illuminates. This high state of awareness and readiness is called *zanshin*, and is expected to be reflected in a fighter’s stance and focus as he steps back from scoring a point; some judges require it for the point to be awarded. *Zanshin* is also sometimes used to describe the perfect transition from one technique to the next in a kata, never losing focus or readiness. In *kyudo* (Japanese archery), *zanshin* refers to the posture maintained after the arrow is released, until it strikes its target.

The origin of *mushin* is related to the Zen practice of *zazen*, which is performed in a seated, motionless position. Like *mushin*, it involves a stilling of thought while remaining totally receptive. *Zazen* is not considered a mental exercise or a form of meditation. It is described as “thought without thought,” a dimension of thought lacking conscious activity. A perfect state of *zazen* is said to yield *satori*, or “pure freedom of thought.” This has proven to be a highly effective state of consciousness for fighting, and through it the warriors of ancient Japan perfected the practice of all their martial arts. Consequently, *zazen* has sometimes been called “the religion of the samurai,” though it is not actually a religion but rather (in martial arts applications at least) a purely practical technique.

Interestingly enough, a well-trained fighter with good *mushin* and *zanshin* can usually tell if his opponent is maintaining a similar state of awareness. A momentary break in concentration by one party creates an opening called a *suki*, during which he cannot respond fast enough to counter a move by an opponent still in a state of *mushin*.

Clearing the mind of all thoughts, and holding it empty but in a heightened state of readiness, is much more difficult than it sounds. Our brains are not accustomed to functioning in that way; we are used to multi-track parallel processing, that is, thinking or monitoring or making calculations on many levels simultaneously. While preparing for a sparring match in the dojo, for example, we may be distracted by the sights and sounds all around us, changes in the spectators or the sensei or the temperature, what's going on in the next ring, how we are feeling, who we may have to fight after the present opponent, what strategies worked on the last one, and so on. All of this thought activity occupies computing space in our mental computer which cannot be devoted to the impending fight. As with any computer, the less computing power you bring to bear on a problem, the slower and "dumber" you are. This idea is capsulized in an old Zen saying:

When one eye is fixed upon your destination, there is only one eye left with which to find the Way.

I personally believe there is a relationship or a parallel between the concept of *mushin* and the phenomenon known as the *idiot savant*. Idiot savants are people who, by most ways of measuring, are severely mentally retarded; but they can perform one particular task, usually a trivial one, at a superhuman level of calculation. These people appear to have lost access under normal circumstances to much of their brain's computing and thinking space, resulting in greatly reduced intelligence in their general life. But for some particular type of problem (adding large numbers in their head, or calculating days of the week for any given date in history, for example) they find a small window into all those unused brain cells, and bring them all to bear on the single problem. The result is that they can compute at the super-genius level on that tightly restricted type of problem.

The fighter who has mastered *mushin* is, in effect, creating a temporary state in his mind akin to that of the idiot savant. And through this mental discipline he or she becomes a sort of genius at fighting for a few minutes. Reaction time is radically shortened, and calculation of appropriate responses and countermoves takes place at lightning speed, too fast to consciously follow one's own thoughts in any stepwise fashion. This is probably because the calculations are being broken into segments which are all run simultaneously, so there is no linear train of thought to follow. The answer just appears, magically, in the blink of an eye.

Another related experience (which the average karate-ka is more likely to be familiar with) is the "slow-motion" crisis situation. This usually occurs during a fast and serious emergency like an impending car accident or a bad fall. Suddenly events seem to be moving in slow motion, and our muscles seem to move with agonizing sluggishness. Obviously the world did not really slow down; we only perceive it that way because for a few moments the frightened mind focuses *all* of its computing power on the one subject. Computing time is proportionately reduced and speed of thought increased to a very unfamiliar degree. With *mushin*, the fighter creates that state of mind at will, when needed, and not as a panic response. This gives a tremendous advantage over fighters who have yet to master it, because in comparison they will really be thinking in slow motion.

Every student has the potential to control his or her own mind. Begin by trying to hold your mind alert but free of thought while sitting quietly in the cross-legged (*seiza*)

position. As with the low horse stance, you will probably only be able to maintain it for a few seconds at first. After a period of solitary practice, try it in the next sparring class. With perseverance, *mushin* and *zanshin* can be perfected, and the satisfaction of conquering one's self will add substantially to the joys of training.

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