

Dullfulness

When we are behaving mindlessly, that is to say, relying on categories drawn in the past, endpoints to development seem fixed. We are then like projectiles moving along a predetermined course. When we are mindful, we see all sorts of choices and generate new endpoints.

—Ellen J. Langer, *Mindfulness: Choice and Control in Everyday Life* (1989)

Much has been made of martial training that results in the practitioner reacting so rapidly and accurately that she cannot have possibly stopped to calculate or even consider her actions. It makes a perfect movie sequence. Scene 4: the orphan girl brought up by the aging kung-fu master is practicing Young Duck Sinks Trunk first alone, then with a wooden dummy, and then with a training partner. Scene 149: the evil Ram Buk attacks her in order to take revenge on her master who had dismissed him from his school ten years before. She not only avoids his attack with Duck Buck Ram Slam, but also dominates him with an advanced version of Young Duck Sinks Trunk, just as the sun sets to silhouette her perfect posture.

The assumption is, however, that Ms. Practitioner was practicing mindlessly in order to react mindlessly. I don't think so. I cannot deny that movements get into muscle memory and that sometimes what we practice is exactly the way we react, but as often (if not oftener) the way we react is completely different from the way we practiced, although it is still dependent on our absorbing the uncategorized wisdom that practice provided. As Ellen Langer suggests in the lead quote, relying on learned categories limits one's choices. For that reason, we must constantly expand our categories so as to make our choices limitless. I believe we do that by combining mindless and mindful practice, in their correct context.

According to William James, "Genius...means little more than ...perceiving in an unhabitual way." Is it possible to get into the habit of perceiving un-habitually? If so, doesn't that imply the mindless practice of that which we have first considered mindfully as well as the mindful practice of that which we can already do mindlessly?

According to Ms. Langer, who admittedly is talking about self-development rather than martial arts, a mindful person is one who can create new categories, is open to new information, and can see more than one aspect of a subject. Traditional martial training often restricts these characteristics, at first for new students, but later even for seniors. When students are not encouraged to expand their categories of perception, at least occasionally, they remain the opposite of mindful or, to coin a term, "dullful".

I cannot count how many seminars I have taught in which high-ranking students, when presented with a new circumstance that required a new response, force their old, habitual responses upon it. I recall the late Toru Tanaka teaching a simple release from a rear 2-hand choke to a class of Korean stylists who felt it necessary to do a knife hand block as they turned rather than loop their arms around their opponents' arms. Perhaps more practice would have opened their eyes, but it surprised me that, as well trained as they were, they were also dullful. Used to defending against lunge punches and sparring combinations, they were not only un-habituated to practical self-defense, but also unable to allow another paradigm to enter their physical repertoire. This goes

to show that (1) training works, but that (2) training does not always work the way we think it will. It also illustrates how people naturally go through learning stages. These students may have been consciously competent, but had not yet risen to unconscious competence.

All learning limits the learner. If it did not, you would try to solve a problem in physics by adding more mayonnaise to the recipe, or try to negotiate a business deal by getting a more powerful set of binoculars. In order to react mindlessly, one must have some mindless training, but one also must study mindfully by understanding the nature of one's movements and expending their implications in order to avoid the dreaded dullfulness.